



CONSPIRACY
OF *Dragons*

LOUISA
MASTERS

A HERE BE DRAGONS NOVEL

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OceanofPDF.com

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Conspiracy of Dragons

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CONSPIRACY OF DRAGONS

There's only one person I trust...

It's no secret that I'm hard to handle. People get annoyed by me. Sometimes they're amused, but not for long. It's not easy to deal with a paranoid conspiracy theorist, and I stretch everyone's patience.

Everyone except Wil. He was there at the beginning, when I was rescued from my old life, and he's stuck with me since. He's been my friend when no one else wanted to. Patiently taught me how to fit in. He's the one person I know I can rely on.

He's the only man I can see myself ever being with. The only man I would want to spend eternity with.

But when my past rears its ugly head and the stuff of my nightmares rises from the dead, the hope of a happy future rapidly fades. I need him more than ever, but I can't risk him. I can't let anyone use him against me.

Torture doesn't have to be physical to hurt. And I'm not going to let myself be hurt again.

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CHAPTER ONE

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Steffen

BRANDT DIDN'T TELL me what he wants to talk to me about, but I've got a very strong feeling that it's nothing good. Not that a lot of things are good, ever—nearly everything that happens is bad for someone.

But since that meeting last Saturday where Fabian announced that the only way to stop the decimation of other species' abilities—and their eventual obliteration as a result—was to let humans rediscover that they have magic, there have been no good things.

None.

How can there be?

Letting humans have magic again is a stupid and dangerous idea. This is a species that attempted and nearly succeeded in using their magic to wipe out all other higher-intelligence species on this planet, stopped only because the life force that governs the universe stepped in. Since then, they've shown again and again that they're still willing to annihilate others at the least provocation. The only not-terrible thing to come out of Saturday's meeting was that everyone agreed we other species didn't have to reveal ourselves to humans. I was fully prepared to start researching other dimensions to move to if that decision had gone the other way, and I would have dragged Brandt and all of dragonkind with me.

I stop outside the door of Brandt's city office. Despite all the work I've put in to make it safe, I hate this building. There

are too many people I don't know coming and going, and it's so close to other buildings full of random people... most of them humans. How can I protect Brandt in a place like this? I much prefer when he's at Here Be Dragons. No place in existence is completely safe, but at least there I have a lot more control.

Sending a scowl toward two elves who are lingering in the hallway, probably plotting something, I knock. Brandt calls for me to enter, and I sigh. That means he's left the door unlocked again.

Sure enough, the knob turns easily under my hand. I slip into the room and close the door behind me, making sure to activate the biometric lock I had installed as an additional layer of protection.

"The lock can't slow attackers down if you don't use it," I point out.

Brandt doesn't even look up from his laptop screen. There's a furrow between his brows that I know means he's concentrating very hard on not working. Sure enough, when I round the desk to look over his shoulder, the screen is filled with animated graphics.

"Which game is this?" I ask, leaning down to see better. When we first got to Earth, I spent many, many, *many* hours learning and playing a variety of online games. Then Brandt and Kethe suggested it would be a good idea to stop because I was getting obsessive and addicted. They weren't wrong, so I don't do that anymore.

"*Fortnite*," Brandt says absently. "And I left the door unlocked because it's too annoying to have to get up every time someone wants to come in. Change it to a regular lock instead of biometric, so I can use my magic to unlock it."

"That's less secure," I grumble, but I will. A secure lock does no good if it's never engaged.

Brandt doesn't reply, too engrossed in his game, and I straighten and move around the desk to sit in one of the visitor chairs. They're both bolted to the floor so they can't be used as

a weapon against Brandt. It annoys him, but small details like that are important.

I make a mental note to replace Brandt's lock, using a memory trick to ensure I won't forget. It's something I trained myself to do, because written and electronic notes can be stolen and used against you. Yes, there are ways to invade the mind and steal information from there, but that ability is restricted to much fewer people and usually requires a specific skill set. Plus, I have some excellent mind traps that would debilitate them. So my brain is the safest place to keep information.

Finally, Brandt makes a noise of frustration and closes his laptop. "That damn..." He shakes his head. "If it wasn't cheating to use my magic, I would."

Narrowing my eyes, I think about what that would entail... using magic to make computer code change. It would be a complicated but fun spell.

"I don't want to do it," Brandt adds hastily. "Don't do it."

"I wasn't going to," I assure him, even though I now want to. But he's right, it would be cheating, and ultimately it's pointless. Whether or not Brandt gets ahead in an online game won't have any impact on his safety or that of dragonkind.

He studies me for a moment longer, then nods, seemingly satisfied that I'm not going to mess with his game. "I guess you're wondering why I asked you to meet with me."

"Do we need to make some updates to your security? Because I've been thinking about a magical tracker—"

"No. No. Tracking is not necessary. There will be no magical trackers. My personal security is fine." He shakes his head emphatically, eyes wide, and I smile on the inside. I like to occasionally suggest things I know he'll never agree to, just so he won't argue when I "settle" for lesser security protocols. Not that I'd be against a magical tracker—if he agreed, it would make things so much easier for me. But I know Brandt well enough to know that kind of invasion of privacy is never going to happen.

“Well, then is it about security at Here Be Dragons? I spoke to my contact last week about getting some more missile launchers, and he thinks it’s possible.”

“No more missile launchers. We have enough already. Nobody is going to attack us, Stef. The only people who know we’re here are our friends and allies.”

I keep quiet. Friends and allies are all very good, but I’ve done enough research to know how quickly they can turn on you. Brandt likes to believe in the good in people, but my job is to prepare for the worst.

He seems to be waiting for me to acknowledge that we’re safe here, but I *can’t*. We’re not safe anywhere, really. Safer, maybe, but true safety doesn’t exist.

Finally, he sighs. “No more missile launchers, at least.”

I can agree to that... for now. “No more missile launchers. So what do you need, then?” It’s not like we don’t see each other several times a day. I escort Brandt nearly everywhere he goes and sit in on most meetings that affect our species.

“It’s about the plan to reintroduce humans to magic,” he begins, and every atom in me vibrates on high alert.

“That plan is a mistake,” I tell him, not for the first time.

“I know you feel that way, but the plan is going ahead. And after some detailed consultation, it’s been decided that you should be part of it.”

It takes a lot to surprise me. I’m renowned for preparing for every contingency. You can’t guard against something if you don’t know it exists, so I make sure to investigate every possibility.

This isn’t something I thought could be possible.

“Me? Didn’t I make it clear I think this is a terrible idea?”

“Oh, you did. Many times. In many creative ways. Thank you for the footage of human war zones that you sent me over breakfast yesterday, by the way. That certainly impacted my appetite.”

“Obviously not enough, since we’re having this conversation.” I sniff. “And your sarcasm is noted and found wanting.”

He ignores that and continues, “Believe it or not, people have noticed the work you do.”

“Protecting you, you mean? They damn well better notice, since visible security is often a deterrent.”

“Yes, the way you insisted on patting down the species leader of the vampires before letting her into my office was very visible. Not sure how much of a deterrent it was, though, since she asked me if you were single.”

She... did? “What did you say?”

“I told her she’d be better off flirting with a rabid crocodile.”

“Do crocodiles get rabies?” I thought only mammals were affected. Mammals like humans. Though humans don’t actually need to be infected to act like rabid monsters.

Brandt shrugs. “Does it matter? Did you want her to hit on you?”

That would be a firm no.

“You’re getting sidetracked,” I tell him, and he glares at me.

“Whose fault is that?”

“Not mine. You’re the one going off on tangents about the vampire species leader.” Who I’ll definitely not pat down next time. I’ll use a scanner instead. Or maybe a subtle spell. Nobody has to know.

Brandt closes his eyes and sucks in a breath through his nose, then opens them again and pastes on a smile. I stiffen. I know that smile. It’s the one he uses when he has a job for me that I’m going to hate.

“Getting back to the point I was making, people have noticed the thorough and often ridiculously excessive lengths you undertake to ensure my security. Since we’re about to

embark upon what may prove to be the most dangerous challenge on Earth in nine thousand years, they reason that someone with such... detailed experience assessing risks might be a benefit.”

Oh. Sure, I can do that. “No problem.”

Brandt’s eyes narrow. “No problem?”

“Yes. They want me to assess their plans and point out the problems, right?”

He still looks wary, but adds, “And offer advice on how best to proceed.”

I nod. “Then yes, I can help with that.”

A wrinkle forms between the wing leader’s eyes. “Really? I thought you’d... Will you have time with all your other duties? I can reduce them, delegate some things to others.”

“That won’t be necessary. This really won’t take long at all. In fact, I can do it right now.” I lean forward. “Scrap the whole idea. There is no safe way to give humans magic.”

Brandt moans and leans back in his chair. “I should have expected that. I don’t know why I thought... Steffen, I understand your perspective on this. I do. I understand why you believe this is a bad idea. Part of me even agrees with you. But the life force has made it very clear that this is the *only* way forward. If we don’t do this, don’t give humans back the knowledge of magic, the other species will continue to lose their abilities and potentially become extinct. The universe needs balance.”

“The universe’s needs aren’t my priority. My priority is the safety of you and our species. And since this problem doesn’t affect us, I’m not inclined to support any action that will increase the danger we do face.”

His reproachful look causes shame to rise inside me. “That’s beneath you, Stef.”

“Is it? You know where I come from.”

Brandt’s out of his chair and around his desk before I finish the sentence, planting himself in the other visitor chair

and leaning toward me. “It’s because I know where you come from and who you really are that I know it’s beneath you. Nobody has suffered more for our people than you. If you truly can’t bring yourself to do this, I won’t ask it. I’ll come up with an excuse. Because I know you’re not selfish, and I won’t force you to violate your boundaries. Not ever.”

The intensity of his expression plunges me back to the day we first met. The day he saved me. Before then, I’d had nothing but doubt and uncertainty and the knowledge that nothing was safe. But from the moment Brandt looked at me and I felt the surety of the wing leader’s presence, there was hope.

Hope that the other species are clinging to now.

I jerk my chin in a nod. “I’ll do it.”

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CHAPTER TWO

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Wil

STEFFEN'S in a gloomy mood when he comes back from his unplanned meeting with Brandt. I'm not sure how much of that is because the meeting wasn't scheduled well in advance, and how much is due to the contents of the meeting... which he still hasn't told me about. Admittedly, we've been busy, but I think he's also brooding over whatever it is. Stef's a champion brooder.

Whatever, he'll probably tell me eventually. It's a point of great pride to me that I'm one of the very few people Steffen trusts. In fact, even though the security team has another dozen members, I'm the only one he trusts with Brandt's personal security. Besides himself, of course.

So I let him brood in peace, just keeping a loose eye on him in case he slips from brooding into paranoia. True paranoia, where he loses touch with his current reality, not just when he has a surface-level paranoid thought. It doesn't happen that often anymore, but occasionally it does overtake him, and he'll spend hours coming up with incredibly complex conspiracy theories. His ability to assess every risk in any situation is what makes him so brilliant at his job, but the downside is that he sees risks where they don't really exist, and since he's got an overblown sense of responsibility, he'll work himself into the ground trying to protect people from things that aren't ever likely to happen.

It's just one of the things that make him amazing.

We get through most of the afternoon in peace, and I'm midway through reviewing applications for the teaching roles

at the flight school when I get a message from Percy.

Percy: Do you have a few minutes?

I do, and even if I didn't, one doesn't say no to the wing leader's other half without a very good reason. Not that Percy or Brandt would care if I asked them to wait, but I'd care.

Wil: Of course. On my way.

I lock my computer, then glance over at Stef. "Percy's asked me to stop by."

He lifts his head immediately. "Is he okay?"

"As far as I know. He just asked for a few minutes of my time." I know better than to answer a question like that with "yes" or "of course" unless I'm absolutely sure. Steffen does better with "I don't know but will find out" than an absolute answer that doesn't have evidence to back it up. Just one of the things I've learned after knowing him for thousands of years.

He nods, and I leave our shared office. Being his second-in-command has the perk of sharing a workspace only with him, instead of everyone else on the team. The other benefit is that we're right down the hall from Brandt's office. The small meeting room Percy likes to use when he works from here is just around a corner.

I knock lightly on the open door, and he glances up with a smile. "Thanks for coming, Wil. Close the door."

Ooh, not something small, then. I make sure the door is closed and then slide into a seat at the table. "I hope nothing's wrong."

Percy shakes his head. "No. You can tell Steffen I'm fine." His gentle smile makes it clear he's not mocking—not that he would, anyway. Percy fits in incredibly well with us, far better than I would have expected of a non-dragon. Even Steffen bonded with him immediately. Well... almost immediately. I think it has to do with the fact that Percy used to be the lucifer, the leader of the Community of Species here on Earth. He's used to dealing with people's foibles.

"Thanks. It helps."

“Steffen’s actually the reason I wanted to see you.”

I try not to visibly stiffen, but something must give me away, because Percy shakes his head. “I’m not going to ask you to spy on him or anything. You know he had a meeting with Brandt before?”

“Yes. He hasn’t told me what it was about yet.” My tone is slightly defensive. If Steffen’s not ready for me to know, it’s nobody else’s place to tell me. He’s my boss and friend. He might have his quirks, but he’s insanely good at his job, and I won’t let anyone undermine that—not even Percy.

“Then I won’t tell you the details,” Percy says, reinforcing my belief that he fits with us. “I don’t have any doubt he’ll fill you in when he’s ready. This is going to be a big effort for all of us, but especially Steffen, and Brandt and I are worried about him. Things have been more unsettled for him than usual lately.”

He’s talking about the incident a few months back when Fabian tried to hug Steffen and his instinctive reaction was to throw Fabian across the room and into a wall. There have been other small things since then that show Stef is having a rougher time than normal, but that’s the big one.

“He’s coping. And he’s been making an effort to be more aware of friendly gestures.” Which I think might be causing him more stress, but I’ve been keeping an eye out.

“We know. If you notice anyone being careless with his boundaries, please let us know. Stef deserves respect.”

I incline my head. “Of course.” I’d likely rip whoever it is a new one first, but then Brandt and Percy can deal with it after.

“He’s probably going to need more support than usual moving forward, and I wanted you to be aware. We have absolute faith in Steffen, but we also know that you anchor him in a lot of ways.”

My breath freezes, and it’s an effort not to react openly. “Looking after Brandt and the safety of all dragons isn’t a one-

man job.” That’s what he means, right? He can’t possibly suspect...

Percy nods and smiles. “Exactly. Every captain needs a first mate. And friends,” he adds pointedly. “You’re both for Steffen, and so it’s only right that he’s going to need you more.”

I force a smile. “I’m here for him.” Always.



IT’S NOT until we get back to the condo that night that I’m able to talk to Steffen about the meeting. When I got back from seeing Percy, he was deep in conversation with Enderl, one of our security staff, and then we were in transit with Brandt and Percy from the office. Despite the fact that there’s practically zero risk of someone attacking Brandt—and Brandt is far better equipped to defend himself than we are—Steffen insists that we be on alert at all times when journeying to and from the office. It’s a small thing and doesn’t really impact anything, so I don’t complain.

But now Brandt and Percy are secure in the condo upstairs, and we’re locked behind wards in our condo. Officially, we live at Here Be Dragons, Brandt’s estate in the country, but during the week when he’s working out of the city office, we stay here. It’s got a great open-plan kitchen/living room and two bedrooms.

Not that we’ve ever used both.

Stef finishes his circuit of the condo, checking that nobody has broken in while we were out, but instead of going into the kitchen as he usually does, he drops onto the couch and inhales deeply.

Uh-oh.

Wordlessly, I go into our bedroom and fetch his latest project. Most of the time he’s got a handle on the paranoia—even if it doesn’t seem that way to outsiders—but when all the

thoughts are overwhelming him, he needs something to focus on. And that something is his hoard.

I set the bag down beside him on the couch, then retreat to the kitchen to get dinner started while he's settling himself. I really love this whole open-plan living thing they do on Earth—it allows me to keep an eye on him without hovering. It was so much harder to do that back home.

Pushing aside the pang of loss I always feel when I think of home, I put one of Kethe's prepared meals in the oven, then toss a salad with half my attention while watching Steffen embroider smiley faces on onesies. He prefers to work on art pieces—mostly stunning landscapes that seem real enough to step into—but he can get lost on those for days, so while we're in the city, he personalizes clothing for underprivileged children instead. His needlework is incredible, and it's the only thing—aside from sex—that lets him rest his brain. I love watching him, not just for the skill he has, but for the peace it gives him. His dark eyes are intent on what he's doing, but the usual tightness of his expression is gone. He keeps his black hair very short these days, but I remember how it felt curling around my fingers when it was longer. Nothing like my own hair, which is also short but has always been fine and stick-straight mid-brown.

Dinner is nearly ready when he finally sighs and puts down his work. He carefully cuts the thread and puts his needle—one of the antique ones he brought from home—away, then imbues the fabric of the onesie with a spell. I swallow a lump in my throat. For most of us, that spell is nothing special. We grew up with many just like it—spells our parents laid on our things to give a feeling of belonging and love. To boost confidence. Feel-good spells to make our childhoods happy. But I know Steffen never had that, and now he makes it his mission to give it to as many children as he can, no matter their species.

When he tucks away the garment and stands, I'm dishing up our meal, and he takes a stool at the counter and gives me the smile that only I see.

“Thank you,” he says, taking a plate, but I know he’s not just thanking me for the food.

“Anything for you.” I slide onto the stool beside him and pick up my fork. “Better now?”

He nods and takes a mouthful. “Much. The DEA and CSG want me to consult on their plans to reintroduce magic to humans.”

My fork stops halfway to my mouth, and I put it down. Are they fucking crazy? Steffen’s been vocally against this since it was first suggested. “I assume you told them to scrap the whole idea?”

His smile flashes again. “Of course. But Brandt reminded me that the life force is insistent that this is the only way. And I can’t just stand by and watch as they implement unsafe plans.”

I make an agreeing noise, my mind whirling. I can see why Percy wanted to warn me... and why Stef needed some decompression time tonight. He’s probably already catastrophizing about this. There are a lot of things that can go wrong. “Have they made any plans yet that they’ve showed you?”

He shakes his head. “Not that I’ve seen. There’s a meeting tomorrow where they intend to discuss preliminary ideas, and I’ve been asked to attend.”

“That’s great. You can point out some of the problems, and they can adjust before they spend too much time on any one idea.” It’s going to be a disaster. He’ll shoot down everything they suggest, and they’re all going to get frustrated and impatient. Worse, his paranoia will kick into high gear as he mentally considers every possible thing that can go wrong with every element of their ideas.

“You’re worried.” The blunt statement is accompanied by a hand squeezing my thigh, and I lean against him for a brief second.

“Yes,” I confess. I never lie to him, not ever. He trusts me, both professionally and personally, and I will never do

anything to damage that trust or what we have. “I know this is something you can do, and do better than anyone else, but I’m worried that you’ll hyperfocus on small details tomorrow and end up having a bad day.” I pick up my fork and take a mouthful of food. This is important, but it’s not bad, and my dinner’s getting cold.

He hums in acknowledgment. “That’s likely. I need a plan.” That sounds like he’s asking for suggestions, but he’s just processing. I keep quiet and eat some more. “The meeting has a time limit, so my feedback needs to have a time limit. I can only point out the most obvious and likely problems, and no more than three for each idea, with a time limit of ten minutes for each idea. At that point, they’ll know it needs more work. Any further feedback would be overkill and a waste of my time.”

“True. That sounds like the best solution.” And when he says “time limit,” he actually means it. That more than anything else will stop him from going down the path of overthinking. There’s still a chance his paranoia will take over, but not as much.

“Are you going to tell me what else has been bothering you?” he asks, and I jerk, scraping my fork across my plate.

Dammit. I thought I’d managed to hide it. He really doesn’t need this now.

I open my mouth to say I’m not ready to talk about it but make the mistake of looking into his warm brown eyes. There’s nothing but determination there, and I know I can’t fob him off.

CHAPTER THREE

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Steffen

I CAN SEE Wil doesn't want to tell me whatever it is that's had him so preoccupied lately, which means it's probably got to do with me. Wil tells me everything. He's a naturally open person, but with me, he has no secrets at all. That worries me, because there are so many people with bad intentions, and it would be so easy for them to hurt him.

Don't get me wrong: he's highly intelligent and great at his job. But he's a good person who doesn't dig as deep into possible motivations as I do, and that makes him vulnerable.

I will never, ever let anyone hurt Wil. Not even if I have to sacrifice the universe to prevent it.

"Is it because I threw Fabian at the wall?" I prompt. I regret that so much. Fabian's harmless—reckless and too trusting, but harmless—and I like him. But when he put his arms around me without warning, all I could think was that I'd made a mistake, that he was a sleeper agent, that Brandt and Percy and *Wil* were in the house and I'd failed to protect them. I couldn't fail them.

"A little. I think there are a lot of things stressing you at the moment, and that concerns me."

"But that's not the main thing?" I take his fork and put it aside so I can hold his hand. I love touching him this way—innocently but intimately. We don't get to do this anywhere but behind closed doors, so it's private, just for us. Special.

He sighs. "No, it's not the main thing." He hesitates, and I know he's weighing how much it would stress me to put off

this conversation when I know there's something wrong. I hate that he has to do that, that he puts my needs ahead of his all the time, but I also love it. Wil is the only person in existence who thinks of me first. The only one who ever has. To him, I'm not too much work. I'm not a pain in the ass, or a problem. He loves me completely, and from the day we met, I've known I can trust that he'll be with me.

Brandt saved me, but Wil is the reason I kept going after.

"I'm okay," I assure him. "Tell me."

His hand tightens on mine while he stares into my eyes, and then he looks away. "It's been... nice, over the last few years, seeing the people closest to us fall in love and settle down in relationships."

I blink. This isn't what I was expecting. "It has," I agree. And I really mean that. Brandt and Percy were first, and it was a surprise when it happened, but I can't deny that it was good. *Is* good. From my perspective, it helped that Percy is a former head of state himself and already used to the type of security measures I instituted, but there's no doubting that they fit together perfectly. Brandt recently confided in me that he's begun shedding scales in preparation of an egg. I've never had to manage personal security for a hatchling, but I'm determined to get it right. "Although if I had any say in it, Dustin wouldn't have chosen a human."

Wil lifts a brow. "Really? You think he could have not chosen Rob?"

I shrug. He has a point... and I suppose if he had to choose a human, at least one who was already aware of our existence made things a lot easier and safer. "It's been good to see them happy," I concede, because I know Wil likes it when I acknowledge people's feelings. "And things are much better now that Fabian is only having sex with one person." Before, I was in a constant low-level state of concern about him. His personal security is technically not my job, but he *is* the keeper of all our history. If the wrong person got their hands on him, it could prove disastrous.

Wil grins, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "I'm sure Rhys would agree."

"So... it's nice, and we're happy for everyone. What's bothering you?"

"Haven't you ever wanted that?"

My whole body freezes, and it feels as though my head is spinning. What does he mean? "I have that," I manage. "I have you."

He grabs my other hand, so he's holding both. "That's not what I meant. You and me, we're it, right? I love you. You love me. We've been together for over four thousand years, and nothing is tearing us apart."

Air begins to flow through my lungs again, and my brain clicks back into gear. "Yes." I squeeze his hands. "You're the only reason I want to continue existing."

As always when I say that, a mix of pleasure and sadness crosses his face. Pleasure because everyone likes to know they're important to someone, and sadness because he wishes I had another source of happiness in my life. But I don't, and I never will. I can't. The risk is too great.

It's also too great with Wil, but I can't let him go.

"So yes, we have that. We have a loving, committed relationship." He hesitates. "But don't you ever wish other people could be part of it?"

I shake my head, confused. "You want a threesome?"

His laugh is involuntary. "No. You're more than enough for me in bed. I meant our friends. Wouldn't it be great if they knew we were together?"

My heart sinks.

"We could touch each other in front of them. We could share rooms at the estate. We wouldn't have to sneak around."

"We touch each other in front of them," I protest weakly, my brain already racing through the thousands of reasons people knowing I love Wil would be a terrible idea.

He pulls his hands free, and the loss of his touch makes me ache. “I don’t mean platonic casual touches,” he mutters. “Never mind. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

I hate that I’ve made him unhappy. “Wil—”

He shakes his head. “No, Stef, it’s fine. I knew from the outset that you wanted it this way. It’s okay.”

That’s true, but... “What made you want to change things?”

With a shrug, he stands and starts clearing away our dinner. “Seeing the others all so happy, and how we get to be part of that... I thought it would be good to have them be part of our happiness.”

“I wish I could give you that.” The weight of failure sinks down on me.

He sits on the stool again. “Have you considered that maybe you could? Things are different now. We’re here on Earth. We’re safe. He’s dead; soul dead. He can never hurt us.”

I flinch, some inner part of me recoiling in terror from the words. They’re true, but I spent so much of my life with that fear hanging over me that it’s impossible to ignore now.

“I’m sorry,” he starts, but I cover his mouth with my hand.

“Don’t ever be sorry for how you feel,” I order, my voice a lot more intense than I intended. “I... I know all those things. But... there are so many others... I can’t be sure...” I suck in a deep breath. “I can’t risk you, Wil. I just can’t.” My mind is whirling, throwing up scenarios where our revealing our relationship would put him at risk, and I start to feel sick to my stomach.

“Stop.”

His voice rings in my ears, the spell he’s using the only thing that can cut through my paranoia. I block out the fears and focus on him.

“I don’t want this to make things hard for you,” he says, gaze locked with mine. “That’s why I was reluctant to bring it

up. Let's just put it out of our minds. We're happy. We have each other. That's all we need."

I nod. "I only need you."

The smile that touches his lips is small but warms me all the way through. He leans forward and kisses me, and as always, sensation storms through me like a fire through dry brushwood. I don't know if kissing anyone else—sex with anyone else—would be like this, but I doubt it. Wil's the only person I've ever trusted with this part of me, just like he's the only person I've trusted with a lot of other things. If I can't let anyone else so much as hug me, I doubt I'd enjoy sex with them.

But with Wil, it's incredible. The only thing other than my hoard that lets my brain stop. And the only time I can truly show him how special and amazing he is—how much I love him. He's given so much of his life to making sure I'm okay, changed so many things, and never asked for anything in return. Worshiping him in the bedroom is both a pleasure and an attempt to give back.

I slide off my stool and pull him off his, wrapping my arms tightly around him so we're pinned together from torso to knee. He makes an appreciative humming sound against my lips, and I kiss him harder. Deeper. Desperate to wipe away any disappointment he might feel. Desperate to show him the extent of my love, even if I can't do this one thing.

He pulls back and studies my face with concern in his gaze. "I love you, Stef. Nothing can change that."

Relief surges through me even as I marvel at how well he can read me. If it was anyone else, I'd be panicking, but Wil... I want him to know everything about me. If I could open myself up and share my brain with him, I would.

"I love you," I whisper. "I want you."

His eyes sparkle the way they always do when I say that. "Here?" He gestures to the counter where we've had many an enjoyable meal... and I don't mean food.

I shake my head. “No. Couch.” We’ll be more comfortable and I can take my time. We bought the extra-long, extra-wide couch specifically for that reason.

He kisses me again, then eases out of my hold and takes my hand to pull me over to the couch. I stop him before he can flop onto it—I want him completely naked.

“Clothes off,” I order, and he hitches a brow with a little smile.

“You’re only the boss of me at work,” he chides, and I feel my lips curve in a matching smile. Before we got together, nobody had ever told me sex could be playful.

“You want to be the boss of me?” I ask, and his smile turns into a grin.

“Shirt off, pants open, sit down,” he demands, and I race to obey. He waits until I’m seated on the couch, chest bare, pants unbuttoned and unzipped, looking up at him before he starts slowly unbuttoning his shirt. I don’t know how he manages to make undoing buttons so sexy, but he always does.

Halfway down his chest, he stops. “Something wrong?” I ask, then clear my throat to dispel the hoarseness.

“I forgot to tell you...” Wil leans down, tracing a finger from my breastbone all the way down the middle of my torso, over my abdomen, right down to... My breath catches. “Cock out.” His hand dips inside my underwear and pulls out my dick, nudging my briefs down to trap my balls in place. That’s going to be utter torture in a little while. Maybe not that little, given the way his hot hand is working me.

“Wil,” I growl, and he chuckles and releases me. Not what I was hoping for, but I can’t be mad when he resumes his slow striptease. The rest of his shirt buttons are undone, and he leaves the shirt open while he removes his belt, slowly sliding the smooth leather from the loops. Then the button of his pants. His hand hovers over the zipper.

“Oops. Forgot my shoes.”

He leans over to unlace them, his head practically in my lap... and then it *is* in my lap, his lips wrapping around the tip

of my cock for a slow, hard suck.

“Wil,” I gasp.

He straightens and kicks his shoes off. “All done! Now, where was I?”

“Driving me to desperation,” I suggest, breathing a little raggedly. It astonishes me how much the mere *promise* of Wil can get me going.

“Of course.” He does a little shimmy, and his pants drift lower on his hips. My mouth goes dry. His shirt disappears next, and he pauses for a long moment to let me look my fill of his delicious torso. With clothes on, Wil looks lanky, but naked, you can see how thickly muscled he is. His centuries as a soldier in the DEA army conditioned him, and it’s a habit he’s never broken.

It was those same centuries that left the scars crisscrossing his torso. All his wounds were healed properly, of course, but he asked Sophie to leave some of the scars behind. When I asked him about it, he said they were salutes to the memory of the comrades lost in those skirmishes. I’ve kissed and licked and worshiped every one of those scars.

He tucks his thumbs into his waistband and tugs slightly, and his zipper slides slowly down, giving me the merest peek of what lies beneath. For a heartstopping moment, I think he’s going to keep teasing me, but then he shoves down his pants and underpants and strips them off, taking his socks with them.

And stands before me in all his naked glory.

I take him in from top to toe. The little smirk that says he knows exactly how much I want him. The solid muscles of his chest and arms, the bronze nipples, the dip of his hipbones. There is nothing in this universe more beautiful than Wil.

His cock is pointing at me proudly. I reach out to take hold, half expecting him to stop me. The hot ridges of him are so familiar beneath my palm. Others have told me that Earth species have different cocks to us, and I can’t imagine what that would be like. I’ve only ever known Wil’s.

Our gazes meet, and all levity and teasing fall away. I let him go, and wordlessly he slides into my lap, straddling me, leaning forward to meet me in a kiss. I could kiss Wil forever, through hunger and thirst and delirious exhaustion, and never regret it.

He shifts against me, his dick brushing against mine, and I take the hint, casting the spell that will create lube for us. The slick gel is in my hand a second later, and I use it to gently work Wil open. He doesn't need a lot of prep, but I refuse to do anything that might hurt him.

Finally, though, he breaks the kiss. "I'm ready, Stef." He braces his hands on my shoulders as I semi-reluctantly withdraw my fingers, then rises onto his knees, adjusts his position, and lowers onto my cock.

We both moan breathily as his tight heat closes around me. His head tips forward, his brow resting against mine.

"You're so perfect," I whisper.

"We're perfect," he corrects, his breath feathering against my skin. "Together, we're perfect."

I steal another kiss, unable to put what I'm feeling into words, then close my hands around his hips and begin lifting and lowering him, letting myself slide in and out of him at a steady, measured pace. His hands are still on my shoulders, balancing him, but I want him to come first.

"Jerk yourself," I order, voice tight. He makes a disagreeing noise, and I stop.

"Steffen," he whines.

"Get yourself off, or we just sit here like this all night."

He wiggles his ass experimentally, and the resulting sensations make us both catch our breath. "Could be worse things," he mutters. "Okay, fine."

A tiny laugh bubbles up in me. "I can't believe you're arguing over an orgasm."

He grins. "I want tonight to last."

“So jerk slowly.”

It's his turn to laugh, but that's exactly what he does. We both take it slow, enjoying every inch of sensation, every tingle, every hitched breath and quivering muscle. We stare into each other's eyes as we slowly, painstakingly edge the tension higher and higher, our bodies getting hot and sweaty, skin sliding, breaths exchanged... until Wil closes his eyes and throws back his head, a sound of pure pleasure torn from his throat as his body convulses.

That's all it takes for me: the sight and sound and sensation of Wil coming. I go over, the world whiting out as I reach that place that's just for him and me. Forever.

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CHAPTER FOUR

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Wil

I'M neck-deep in background checks when the office door bangs open and a hellhound storms in.

Or, according to him, *the* hellhound. The pinnacle of all hellhounds. It's worth noting that shortly after he said this, all the other hellhounds in the office went on strike and spent two hours roaming through the building annoying everyone they could get near. There were six brawls, three credible attempts at homicide, a dozen nervous breakdowns, and four glitter bombs before the lucifer stepped in and made Alistair publicly apologize and retract his statement. Lucifer Sam has always struck me as a levelheaded and reasonable person, so when he said, "So help me, Alistair, if you don't fix this, I will stab a blunt pencil through every part of your body," I wasn't sure I believed him. Alistair did, though, and I later found out the pencil-stabbing thing has happened before. So... it really is the quiet ones you need to look out for.

I like Alistair. He's good at his job and fun at parties, and though he can be annoying, he's always treated Steffen with respect. That's my yardstick when it comes to judging people. I don't have time for anyone who acts like Stef's a problem. But as much as I like Alistair, a visit from him usually leads to a lot of wasted time. Sometimes a headache. Occasionally to bad decisions I never know how I agreed to later on.

This time, though, he seems remarkably subdued, despite the bold entrance.

"Hey, Alistair. I'm right in the middle of something, so..."

“I just came to warn you.” He flings himself into one of the spare chairs in suitably dramatic fashion.

“Warn me about what?” Knowing him, it could be anything. I keep working.

“Caolan just texted me. He’s in that meeting with Steffen.”

Fuck. Lifting my head, I see a worried frown on my friend’s face. “What happened?”

Alistair grimaces. “I don’t know. The meeting’s got the highest security classification, so Caolan shouldn’t be texting me at all. The only thing he said is”—he lifts his phone and reads from the screen—“Steffen’s catastrophizing. Help.”

Shit. “Why didn’t he text me?” I dig through the papers on my desk for my phone, wondering what the fuck to do. I can’t go in there. Alistair’s right about the security restrictions, and I don’t want to get Caolan in trouble.

“I don’t know.” Alistair shrugs. “Is there any way to help?”

My phone appears out of the stupid papers—why is there so much paper on my desk, anyway?—and I snatch it up, tapping the screen. It doesn’t respond.

“My phone’s dead.” Did I forget to charge it? I never forget... but that’s not important right now. “Can you text Caolan back? Tell him to remind Stef of the time. Say they’re running out of time or something.”

Alistair doesn’t respond, just taps out the message. Then he studies me. “Take a breath. This isn’t your fault.”

Grabbing the charging cable, I force a smile and plug my phone in. “I know, I...” My voice fades—along with my smile—when nothing happens. Okay. Disconnect. Reconnect.

Still nothing.

I get up and go over to Steffen’s desk to try his charger, with the same result. Wow, this is turning out to be a shitty afternoon.

Alistair’s phone chimes, and I turn to him.

“Thumbs-up,” he reports. “So I guess that worked.” He frowns. “Steffen’s usually okay in structured meetings. I wonder what happened to set him off?”

I shrug. It could be anything, but my guess is someone asked the wrong question. “As long as he’s back on track now.” He’ll tell me later, anyway. “I need to go intimidate a tech until they fix my phone. Wanna come?” He’s coming whether he wants to or not, since he’s currently my only link to the meeting where Stef might need my help. But I don’t need to tell him that; he’s already bounded out of the chair, face alight with excitement.

“Yes! Can I intimidate too? Please? I’m good at it, I swear!”

Many people would doubt that, but I’ve seen him in battle. Still...

“You can be good cop. I need you to convince them to help me even if I piss them off.”

From the way he grins, I suspect I might have just made a mistake.



“...so that’s why you need to bump my man Wil up the list,” Alistair concludes, sitting in the tech guy’s chair with his feet up on the tech guy’s desk, eating peanuts from the tech guy’s lunchbox.

The tech guy (whose name is Gary) and I stare at him. He smiles winningly back. “I’m not leaving until Wil has a functioning phone. Fair warning, I get bored really easily. How do you feel about karaoke? I have this great app on my phone...” He pulls out his phone and unlocks it, and Gary turns to me in desperation.

“You gotta get him out of here,” he pleads. “Nobody will get any work done if he starts singing. And I’m hungry. He’s not going to leave me any food.”

I spread my hands. “I sympathize. Really, I do. But he’s a lot bigger than me, and I don’t have a functioning phone to call someone to help.”

Gary’s fulminating glare promises retribution. He snatches my dead phone from my hand and stomps to someone else’s workstation, kicking them off and plugging my phone in. I barely understand how most Earth technology works, but the community of species likes to combine tech with sorcery, and I have no ability to see that at all. Elf magic is a hybrid of sorcery and the type of magic humans can use, but dragon magic is completely different. So for all I know, he’s just humoring me in the hopes I’ll give up and go.

I half turn toward Alistair, wondering if I can get some of those peanuts, and Gary makes a shocked sound that has me spinning back.

“What?”

“Someone tried to hack your phone. The security protocol activated and killed it.” He picks up the desk phone and punches a speed-dial button as Alistair scrambles out of the chair and joins me hovering over Gary’s shoulder. “Hey, this is Gary in Tech. We’ve got an attempted hack on a phone. Okay, thanks.” He hangs up, then looks up at us both. “Security is sending someone to talk to you.”

“I *am* security,” I snap, though I know he means CSG security, who actually know how to handle all this, including the sorcery aspect. We work closely with them on anything that involves Earth technology while some of our team are learning what’s needed. It takes longer when you’re starting with zero knowledge of even the most basic technology, and it hasn’t even been six years since we migrated to Earth.

“What’s the protocol on this?” Alistair asks, his face serious. “Wil is the second-in-command of dragon security. Is there a chance someone was able to access his phone?”

I think back through my day, trying to pinpoint when that could have happened. I took two calls before leaving home this morning, then sent some messages after arriving at the office. Since then, I’ve been in background check torture—I

left the office to use the bathroom once, but had lunch delivered. My phone's been either in my pocket or on my desk—with me beside it—since I last used it.

“Tell security I'll be in Brandt's office,” I order Gary. “Al, I need you.”

We make for the door with Gary calling after us, “That's not how this works! You're supposed to wait here!”

“What is it?” Alistair asks when the door to the tech office closes behind us. We walk at a fast clip toward the elevator lobby.

“I used my phone after I got here this morning, and it hasn't left my presence all day.”

“Fuck.” Alistair pulls out his phone and makes a call. “Gideon? Shut up. Get in with Sam and stay with him. Tell the elves to check on the king. Keep it quiet for now, but try and get David out of the meeting. And Steffen,” he adds, glancing sideways at me. Gideon must answer in the affirmative, because he ends the call as we reach the lobby. One glance at the elevator shows it's six floors away, so we hit the stairwell instead, taking the stairs two at a time. I curse my lack of phone.

We slow when we reach the DEA floor, pausing to take a breath and not look panicked before I push open the door to the lobby. Dáithí, the receptionist, looks over at us and smiles.

“My phone's dead,” I tell him without stopping. “Could you ask Tech to get me a new one ASAP? And ask Enderl to come to Brandt's office now, please.” I don't want to cause a scare by asking for the whole security team. Dáithí's great, but he likes to dramatize things.

Sure enough, his jaw drops and his hand goes to his throat. “No *phone*? You poor thing! I'll get right on that.”

“Call Enderl first,” I instruct, turning to walk backward so I don't have to stop.

He nods, already punching a button on his switchboard, and I turn back and pick up my pace a little.

“Percy’s in meeting room C,” I tell Alistair.

“On it.” He branches off as I beeline to Brandt’s office.

There’s an elf I recognize coming down the hall from the opposite direction, stride quick, face set, and I remember that Brandt was meeting with the king this afternoon.

“Wil,” the elf—Eoin—says. “What the fuck is happening?” We reach the door to Brandt’s office at the same time, and I open it without knocking.

Brandt and King Raðulfr look up in surprise as we walk in and close the door, but aside from a quick glance to assure ourselves they’re not in immediate danger, Eoin and I ignore them. Instead, we check the windows, any potential hiding places, and do a preliminary magic scan for dangerous toxins or surveillance devices.

“What happened?” Brandt asks as he and the king obediently hand over their phones when Eoin holds out his hand.

“Is it an actual security breach or just a suspected one?” the king adds.

We check the phones, then hand them back and unclench a bit.

“I don’t know,” Eoin answers belatedly. “We got a call from Noah at CSG, but no details.”

“My phone’s been hacked,” I tell them. “And it happened sometime after I got to work today.”

Brandt stands abruptly as the implication sinks in. “Percy?”

“Alistair’s with him.” He relaxes. Alistair used to work directly for Percy when he was the lucifer.

“So building security’s been breached,” the king muses. “Any chance it was one of our people trying to test their skills? Or a practical joke?”

Shrugging, I head for the door. “Possibly. If it is, they’ll regret not having cleared it with us first.” I stick my head out

into the hallway and am rewarded by the sight of Alistair and Percy heading our way. “Here you go,” I tell Brandt, opening the door wider.

“Is he okay?” Percy demands, and I nod, holding the door for him to enter. Then I step out into the hall to talk to Alistair.

“Is the lucifer secure?”

“Yes. Gideon’s with him, and nothing will get to Sam through Gideon.”

I snort. Demons have a reputation for being overprotective of their partners, and Gideon is the epitome of a demon.

“Noah texted David that we had an issue and needed the meeting to end, so David’s making an excuse.”

I raise my brows. “He’s going to shut down the whole meeting?”

Alistair shrugs. “How else can he and Steffen both leave without causing talk? We want this quiet for now.”

True. I look past him as Enderl approaches at a steady clip, eyes wary. His magic reaches out to me, offering more power if I need it, and another knot of tension loosens.

“We’re all okay,” I tell him, which is code for “not an emergency.” “There’s been a security breach in the building, and I don’t have a phone. Can you call two of the others to stay with Brandt and Percy? And then I need you to help me deal with this.”

“Of course.” He pulls out his phone. “Where’s Stef?”

“Meeting. He should be here soon.”

While he makes his call, the door behind me opens. “Wil,” Brandt says, “where’s Steffen?”

“He was in that meeting,” I tell him, trying to be vague since Enderl hasn’t yet been told about the whole human magic plan. “He—” Fuck. *Fuck!* I turn to Alistair. “Call David. Make sure he tells Steffen that Brandt’s okay.”

CHAPTER FIVE

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Steffen

THIS MEETING HAS BEEN A DISASTER. And not just for the reasons I expected.

I was right that the ideas being presented were problematic. The biggest problem—that humans would be relearning magic, the weapon they used in their attempt to wipe out every other higher species on the planet—was one I had to overlook. If the life force said this is necessary, then it's necessary. But there was a myriad of other issues with each idea presented.

I tried to stick to the plan. I pointed out only the biggest issues, and only within the allotted timeframe. My control was good. But it turns out that people don't like it when you point out the flaws in their ideas, and they were all getting grumpy.

Then one of them said, "Wow, you're just a basket of misery, aren't you? Are you sure those are the *only* problems with this? There's not anything else?" and I made the mistake of hesitating. She saw, got all upset, then demanded I tell her everything that was wrong with it.

Sophie tried to step in. David tried too. But the woman was determined, and I couldn't stop myself. It was twenty-five excruciating minutes before Caolan shouted, "Steffen, we're running out of time!" and my paranoia paused long enough for the rest of my brain to take control. "We don't have any more time to give this," Caolan repeated, and I was able to stop.

The meeting moved on—somewhat cautiously—but my brain hasn't. Now that I know how many disastrous and

dangerous outcomes could be associated with that idea, I can't stop thinking about them, can barely concentrate on the meeting.

"I'm sorry, everyone," David interrupts suddenly, looking up from his phone. "I need to deal with something. Let's leave it here for today. There's a lot to be going on with, anyway."

What? I frown, my instincts tingling. Some of the others exchange glances.

"We can continue without you," the woman who got so upset with me says. "I don't think we should waste—"

"It's not wasted. Today's shown that there are a lot of angles that haven't been considered, and those should be addressed before we make concrete plans to move forward." He sounds perfectly reasonable, but the sideways glance he slides Caolan has me reaching for my phone.

Nothing.

Wil would have called or texted if something was wrong. I'm certain of that. But I can't shake the feeling that there's a problem.

Is this just my paranoia?

The woman looks like she wants to protest again, but she works for CSG and David is her superior, so she backs down. The meeting begins to break up. I stay in my seat. Wil would have texted if there was a problem. This is just my paranoia. There's no need to rush out. This is just my paranoia. I can control this.

The person beside me leaves, and Sophie slides into their chair. "Do you need to talk?" she asks softly... in elvish. Since the elves who attended are on the other side of the room, that gives us a bubble of privacy.

"Wil would have texted if there was a problem," I tell her. "This is just my paranoia."

She nods. "Wil would have texted," she confirms. "Is the stress bad? Would you like me to dilute it?"

I hesitate. Sophie's our healer and has been for a long time. I trust her as much as I trust anyone who isn't Wil. She's done this for me before, a light healing to remove the anxiety my paranoia causes when I've been catastrophizing. But that doesn't mean I like it. Anything that can change how I feel, either physically or mentally, is difficult for me to deal with.

"I'm okay."

Her smile is calm and gentle. "I'll just sit here with you, then. And when you're ready, we'll go check in with Wil so he can assure you there have been no security issues."

Part of me wants to call Wil and ask him, but he would have texted me. He would. This is just my paranoia.

Unless... what if he couldn't text me? What if Wil's been injured?

Panic surges, but thankfully, Wil and I prepared for this. If Wil isn't able to contact me, someone else will. If there's a security issue and Wil is injured, everyone else on the team knows to call me.

What if the whole team is down?

"This is just my paranoia," I whisper. If something big enough to take down a whole team of dragon security had happened, David would not be calmly walking toward me, talking on his phone. Alarms would be going off, and we'd all be racing through the halls. I'm not going to react blindly to this. I'm in control.

"Steffen." David stops in front of me. "We have a situation. Brandt and Percy are okay."

My heartbeat picks up its pace, and I fumble for my phone, unlocking it and checking my messages. Nothing. "What happened? Is Wil injured?" No no no no no. He can't be. No.

"Nobody's injured," he assures me. "I was just talking to Alistair, who's with Wil and Brandt. They're all fine. I don't know exactly what happened, but I've been told we're needed."

Wil's fine. Brandt's fine. Percy's fine.

Wil's fine.

I stand. "Let's go, then."



IT FEELS like it takes forever to get upstairs to Brandt's office, where David says the others are waiting. My brain is racing, but I think I'm doing a good job of hiding it, because nobody's giving me weird looks and Sophie's not hovering right beside me.

We approach the office, and I see Gisko, one of the dragons on my security team, standing outside talking to Eoin, an elf who handles King Raðulfr's security. Neither of them looks worried—in fact, anyone else would think they just happened to run into each other and stopped for a chat. They wouldn't do that if anyone had been hurt.

Both look our way, and Gisko's face relaxes just a tiny bit. I don't bother stopping to ask what's happened, just nod to acknowledge him and open the door.

Inside, conversation ceases and heads turn toward me. Sophie follows me in.

"Steffen," Brandt says, getting up. "We're okay." I do a visual scan of him and Percy, note that the lucifer, his majesty, another of my security guys, and the demon Gideon are also in the room, and then reach out with my magic for any surveillance or hidden attack spells. The residue of Wil's magic washes over me, telling me he's already done this, but for once, that's not enough to satisfy my paranoia. Probably because I still haven't seen that he's safe with my own eyes.

Satisfied that the room is clear, I weigh my need to ensure Brandt stays safe with the pounding drive to check on Wil... and find out what the fuck is going on. In the end, that drive wins. My job as head of dragon security is not bodyguarding. If there's a threat to Brandt, my expertise is better applied to managing and neutralizing that threat than to stopping an attack with my body.

I nod to my security guy. “You have this?”

Brandt scoffs. “I can look after myself and did for millennia before you were hatched!”

Ignoring him, I wait for confirmation, then glance at Sophie. “Stay here, please.”

She rolls her eyes but nods, and I turn toward the door. It opens before I get there, and my magic leaps up, prepared to—

David sticks his head around it. “All good here?”

“We’re fine. We’d like some details when you have them,” the lucifer says.

“Of course. Getting details is my next step. Gideon, we’re going to need you. Security is sending someone up to stay with Sam.”

Gideon doesn’t look convinced.

“Go,” the lucifer tells him. He doesn’t budge. I’ve always respected Gideon, but my approval inches up a notch. The lucifer sighs. “Aside from the fact that none of us are helpless, there are already three security personnel here,” he points out. “And from what I understand, no direct threat. You’re needed elsewhere.”

There’s a moment of hesitation, then Gideon stands and looks at David. “The two outside come in.”

David nods and pulls his head out as Gideon turns to me. “Your guys are solid?”

I push aside my indignation. I’d ask the same thing in his shoes. “Yes.” Of course, their priority will be to protect Brandt and Percy, but there are only so many defensive positions possible in this room, so they’ll all end up in the same place.

“Okay.” He stares at the lucifer. “Stay here and do what you’re told.”

The lucifer sniffs, unfazed. “You’re sleeping in your LEGO room tonight.”

Gideon doesn’t even acknowledge that, instead heading toward me. I open the door and step out, holding it for him and

then tipping my head at Gisko. He and Eoin enter the office, and I make sure the door closes behind them.

“Where’s Wil?” I ask David, sure he would have gotten that information while I was inside.

“Your office,” he says, starting in that direction. “Apparently someone tried to hack his phone.”

Adrenaline surges through me. Wil’s my lieutenant. Most of our security information can be accessed through his phone, and much more.

“When?” I demand. “Is the condo building compromised?”

“Wil says the attempted hack happened here.”

I nod. Sorcery security on our devices ensures that any hacking has to be done from within a certain distance—a very small distance. That doesn’t mean Brandt’s condo doesn’t need to be checked. And Here Be Dragons, too. I start making a mental list, but first I need to talk to Wil.

The door to my office is open, and two of my security guys are coming out when we get there.

“Steffen,” one of them says. “Everyone’s fine.”

I wish people didn’t feel the need to say that to me. “Where are you going?”

“Wil wants a security check at Here Be Dragons and Brandt’s condo, and then a guard presence there.”

My breath comes just a tiny bit easier knowing that Wil is already implementing these protocols.

“Good. Report regularly.”

They nod and leave, and we enter the office. Wil looks up from where he’s talking to Enderl and Alistair. His gaze skims worriedly over my face, but I’m too busy doing the same to reassure him. He looks... fine. Normal. My magic skims against his, which responds the way it always does, wrapping around me. It’s full of warmth and reassurance, a tiny bit of concern for me, and professional fury that we’re in this situation.

“Good, you’re here,” he says. “My phone was compromised.” He runs down the situation.

“Has security come up to talk to you yet?” David asks, but I’m already pulling out my phone to check the access log for the server. The security on Wil’s phone did its job and wiped the device when it detected the intrusion, but that doesn’t mean the hacker wasn’t already in. No security is foolproof, and it’s possible security was triggered too late.

“Not yet,” Wil replies, “but should be soon. We’ve cleared this room, but I want someone more tech savvy than me to check the computers before we use them.” He comes to my side and looks over my shoulder as I skim the log, the only person I would ever let do that.

“There was an access from the phone at nine forty-six,” I tell him, and he frowns thoughtfully.

“That was me. I sent the schedule to Enderl. There should be another one about ten minutes later, and then that’s it.”

I scroll, and he points out the log entry that was also him. Then we focus, not wanting to accidentally miss a log entry from his phone.

“Nothing,” he says when I reach the end of the list. The relief in his voice is palpable. “Go back; let’s look again.”

I do, peripherally aware of Kirsch, the head of CSG security, arriving and being pointed to our computers by David. Every fiber of my being loathes giving someone access to our electronics, even though neither of us is logged in and I’ve done a thorough background check on Kirsch and know he can be trusted with this. Wil, knowing exactly what’s going through my head, takes my phone from me so I can go oversee.

Kirsch doesn’t look up as I approach. David’s standing at one of his shoulders, and I take up a position at the other, staring at the screen as his fingers fly over the keyboard and code appears on the screen. I have a basic understanding of some forms of coding, since I like to understand how things work, but I’m by no means fluent. Wil convinced me that

becoming a full-time coder wasn't my job and it was something I should delegate. What's happening on my screen is beyond my knowledge.

“Okay, this one looks clean,” Kirsch says. “It's been locked most of the day, is that right?”

“Yes. I've been in meetings.”

He nods. “Just screening for sorcery now...” His fingers stop moving, but he's still looking at the screen. “Okay, you're good. All security measures are intact.” He gets up, and I follow him over to Wil's computer, where he repeats the process and declares it's also safe.

Relieved, I take my phone back from Wil, assured that the hacking attempt failed and our servers are safe. We'll still be changing things up, just in case, but it could be a lot worse.

And I've resisted the urge to lock Brandt and Percy and Wil up somewhere far from here where I can protect them. So far, whoever the mystery invader is, I'm winning.

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CHAPTER SIX

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Wil

BY THE TIME Kirsch and Enderl leave to study surveillance tapes and see exactly where in the building I've taken my phone today and who came close enough to attempt a hack, I feel like things are slightly less out of control. Brandt and Percy and all the other leaders are safe, we're checking their residences, and Steffen is... well, he's not fine, but he's maintaining control. And anyone else would think he's fine, so that's all that matters right now.

Sighing, I turn to the others in the room. "So what does this mean?" We all know better than to assume it was a glitch or prank.

"We need to assume Operation: Survival has been compromised," Alistair says, sounding deadly serious. Except...

"Did you make that name up just now?" David demands, and Alistair shrugs.

"What? It needs a name."

"We are *not* calling it that."

"No," Steffen agrees. "It should be Operation: Suicide." Yikes. Things must have been worse in that meeting than I imagined.

"I take it the meeting went well," Gideon says dryly to David, who shakes his head.

"We need to assume that the attempt on Wil isn't the only one. We've been hacked before, but this time we're better

prepared and equipped. We do a thorough search of all systems and review all personnel.” His jaw sets. “Aside from the as-yet unnamed operation, can anyone think of anything else on the cards that an outsider might want access to?”

I wince and slide a glance at Steffen. I can tell he’s taken that question literally and is already coming up with a multitude of potential conspiracies.

As though to prove my thoughts right, he looks at me. “The flying school. They’re after the fledglings.”

“The school has been operating for two years,” I remind him. “There are easier ways to find information on it than to hack me. But I’ll check.” I *am* in the middle of recruiting for the school’s summer program, so if someone did want a way to get to the fledglings, now would be the time.

“Don’t worry,” Alistair tells Steffen earnestly. “I’ve met dragon fledglings. They can take care of themselves.” He rubs the back of his head, reminding me that a group of our young once accidentally scorched off all the hair there. It was totally his own fault. I didn’t give the kids cookies after or anything.

Steffen narrows his eyes suspiciously at Alistair, and I decide I’d better step in. “I’ll review everything we’ve got going on right now.”

“We’ll do the same,” Gideon grunts. “Once the townhouse has been cleared, I want Sam to work from home for a few days.”

Steffen’s already nodding, no doubt delighted by the thought of getting Brandt back to Here Be Dragons and safely behind the lines of his missile launchers, but David’s pulling a face. “You know he won’t go for that. None of them will, not without evidence of a credible threat to them. Besides, wouldn’t they be better off here, where we have a lot more people to put between them and danger?”

“A lot more people who could be the threat,” Stef mutters, eyes narrowed suspiciously on David. He doesn’t really think David could be a threat... I hope.

“Let’s see what they say,” I suggest in an attempt to mediate, though I think David’s right. None of our leaders is going to go into hiding without a heck of a good reason. “We might have a bigger problem, though. The biggest thing anyone is working on right now is—”

“Operation: Survival,” Alistair interrupts. We ignore him.

“It makes sense that our would-be hacker is trying to get more information on that.”

“Agreed.” David nods.

“But,” I continue, “it’s classified at the highest level. The rest of our team doesn’t even know about it yet, and I assume that’s the same for you.”

“Fuck,” Gideon snaps, realizing where I’m going with this.

“So we’ve either already got a data breach, or we have a top-level leak.” Alistair leans against my desk. “How fucking delightful.”



AS I EXPECTED, Brandt categorically refused to leave the city midweek, especially after he heard what had happened and what our working theories are. His opinion is that we need to go full speed ahead on the plan to reintroduce magic to humans, in an attempt to thwart whatever plans the hacker might have by getting ahead of them. I’m not convinced that’s viable, and Stef’s definitely not, but we had no choice other than to stay. The scans at the condo came back clear, so that’s something, at least.

With everything that happened today, I didn’t get a chance to pull Stef aside and make sure he was okay. I had to satisfy myself with monitoring him through the merge of our magic, which is... unreliable, at best. But he held it together, and while everyone else was checking for any data breaches of their servers, he sat down and put together a comprehensive list of potential leaks and how we can tell which it is. It’ll take

a while to either clear all those people or devise a test to see if it was them, but it's a start.

Now, though, as the door closes behind us and he begins his nightly perimeter check, I need to make sure he's okay.

When he's done, though. Interrupting him now wouldn't help anything.

While I wait, I fetch his embroidery bag. He's going to need it tonight.

Sure enough, when he comes back to me, his eyes fall on it and gleam with longing. "Here," I offer, holding it out. "Just tell me first, are you okay?"

He leans in and kisses me, a brush of his lips against mine, then just stays there, breathing, our mouths the only place we touch... physically. His magic twines with mine, clinging desperately.

"I will be," he says at last, pulling back. "It was a hard day."

"I bet. For me, too. Can I sit with you for a bit?" I usually leave him to it when he's doing needlework, but sometimes he doesn't mind company.

"Please." We settle beside each other on the couch, and while he embroiders a red train along the hem of a small blue T-shirt, I turn on the TV and log into Netflix, deciding to rewatch a few episodes of *The Office*. In a minute, I'll get dinner started, but I like having this quiet time with him.

I can't deny that part of me was bitterly disappointed by our conversation last night. The more time passes, the more I want to bring our relationship into the open. We've been together so long... since long before any of the Earth people we know were even born. Since before several of our friends were born. And yes, I knew from the outset that Steffen wanted us to be a secret, knew and understood why... but so much has changed since then, especially recently. We're in a new place, away from all the dangers that worried him. They don't even exist anymore. I'd hoped that maybe he'd be able to let go of his fears and have a little happiness. I see my

friends being casually affectionate with their partners, or even just talking about them in a way that makes it so clear they're together, and I want that.

I want the universe to know that Stef and I belong to each other.

But if he's not ready for it, I won't push. I have him, and even if things never change, I'll be happy with that, because I'll still have him.

The second episode is wrapping up and dinner's in the oven when Stef finishes the train and puts his needle away. As always, I'm awed by how quickly he can create such beautiful art. In less than an hour, he's made the otherwise basic shirt something just a little bit special. He folds it carefully and tucks it into the bag of finished garments. One of us will drop it off to be distributed later in the week.

"I need to think of a way to handle these meetings better," he says out of the blue. "People don't like being told their ideas won't work, even when I don't outright call them stupid."

"It's a problem," I agree. "Was there anything today that was close to usable?"

He pulls a face and shakes his head. "No. Two of the concepts had potential, but they needed a lot of work. I don't understand why everyone is so willing to put all their trust in humans."

I pick up the remote and hit Pause before the next episode can begin. "Are you sure that's what's happening? I never got the impression that the community of species trusted humans all that much."

He shrugs. "All these plans call for giving groups of humans access to magic without any restrictions."

Ah. There's the issue. Shit.

"What kind of restrictions could there be, though? Once they're shown how to use their magic, there's no way to limit that."

He doesn't meet my eyes, and I sigh.

“Stef.”

“It would be safer for everyone.”

“Short-term, maybe, but you know it would make things worse in the long run. Not to mention it's completely abhorrent.”

He sets his jaw stubbornly, and I bite back a smile. After the meeting where it was decided that humans needed to relearn magic, Steffen, ranting to me in private, suggested the safest way to do it was with captive humans who wouldn't be able to use their magic against us.

Of course, his rant then morphed into a series of conspiracy theories wherein the humans rose up to overthrow their oppressors, so that idea never got off the ground. But the thing with Stef's brain is, while it throws up all the possible things that could go wrong, it also calculates ways to make them work. So I wouldn't be surprised if he hasn't worked out some system where the risk of keeping humans in low-key captivity where they didn't realize they'd lost any freedom—akin to what happened in the movie, *The Matrix*, which both fascinated and terrified him—is less than teaching free humans to use magic.

I'm not worried, though. For all his bluster, I know the one thing Steffen could never, ever bring himself to do is enslave or otherwise hold captive another living being. He struggles with the idea of keeping animals as pets. If someone walked into the next meeting and suggested a human magic farm or something similar, he'd be the first person to knock that on its ass.

“Fine,” he concedes. “But the idea isn't bad. It's just morally unacceptable and infeasible.”

Which to my mind makes it bad, but I get how he classifies things differently. From a logistical standpoint, if you consider the safety of Brandt and other dragons to be the most important factor, with the well-being of humans not relevant, then sure, it's not a bad idea.

“So you need an idea that’s not morally unacceptable,” I prompt, and he nods. “Didn’t someone mention earlier that we could start with humans who were already connected to the community? People like Rob and his family?”

“Yes, but there aren’t enough of them to balance things,” he says sourly. “And that’s where it goes off the rails. We can’t just assume that all the people they trust are trustworthy.”

He’s right about that. As much as we all like to think our friends and family are good people, the truth is, there’s no concrete definition of “good.” People have different priorities and standards, and you can think you know someone well and still be completely surprised by them. But knowing Stef as I do, he’s already thought this through.

“What’s the solution, then?”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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Steffen

I LOOK AT WIL, with that challenging little smile on his lips and the way he's quirked his eyebrow as if inviting me to solve the world's problems, and I fall in love with him all over again.

"We have to do it slower than they're thinking," I say. "Start with the humans who have direct connections to someone in the community. Spouses, children, stepfamilies. People who know about our world and have already been keeping it secret for a long time. People who have a vested interest in the community staying safe and would likely fight on our side if it came down to that."

He opens his mouth—probably to point out that a fight is what we're trying to avoid—and I wave my hand. "Yes, I know. I'm not expecting a battle." Well, only the paranoid part of me is. "But those would be the safest people to start with. I'd still want a security check, but it would likely only need to be a surface one. Maybe just an interview to get their measure, make sure they don't secretly resent their half sister who can shift into a cat and aren't plotting to turn her into a fur coat."

Wil snorts. "You have such a way with word imagery."

"Felid shifters do have nice thick coats," I argue. "If I was a jealous half sister, that would be the ultimate revenge."

He rolls his wrist in a "continue" motion. "Okay, so we've ascertained that the felid shifter's half sister doesn't secretly want to turn her into a coat. That clears her to begin learning magic, right?"

I force myself to say, “Right.” Statistically, that group of people is the lowest risk, especially after a security check, but my paranoia insists that any human is a danger. I remind it about Rob, Dustin’s human boyfriend whose stepfather is an incubus. I’m as sure as I can be that Rob is no danger to us. He’d lay his life down to protect Dustin.

“So the plan is that the next ‘safe’ group to reach out to is friends and family of those people?”

“And that’s where it falls apart,” I confirm. “Just because person A is invested in keeping the community safe, it doesn’t mean their brother-in-law or cousin or best friend is.”

“Agreed,” he says. “What if you add a layer to that, though? If their cousin or best friend has already been let in on the secret and has also been keeping it.”

Alarm rears up inside me. “Those people aren’t supposed to know. CSG guidelines are clear: immediate family members only. People who live with you or might be called on to be next of kin in an emergency.” Anxiety begins to build in my chest.

“Stop,” Wil says. It’s just an ordinary word, no spell behind it, but then I’m not in the grip of paranoia. I make myself take a few deep breaths. “We both know guidelines aren’t always followed to the letter. If those people have been keeping the secret, then they can be included as safe. If they haven’t... well, CSG has a department for that, and since the entire human world doesn’t already know what’s going on, I guess that department is doing a good job.”

I sniff. Adequate, maybe. Probably not good, or they’d already know about all the people who know things they shouldn’t.

“Those people would be a better risk than just random friends and relatives,” I admit, even though the idea of unauthorized people wandering around with the full knowledge of the community makes my brain itch. “They’re the logical next step.”

“Would that bring the numbers high enough to create a balance?”

I shake my head. “No. Even if we brought in all the families and friends, we were still going to fall short. That’s where the plans all went completely off the deep end and wanted to bring in random strangers who could be psychopathic killers.”

The benefit of having known Wil so intimately for so long is that I can predict his thought process. He’s wondering if he should remind me that not every stranger is a psychopathic killer, or if it would be better to keep the conversation on track. I lean over and kiss his cheek, thrilling as always in the small intimacy, and then save him the effort of making the decision.

“Do you think I should suggest we begin immediately with the first-level human contacts and then develop further plans as we go?”

He nods. “I think that would go a long way toward rebuilding some of the bridges that got burned today. David and Caolan are coordinating this operation, right?”

“Yes. I’ll talk to them first.”

“Also pick a plan that was suggested today that has the most promise in those early stages, and suggest amending that. There’s a time crunch for this, right? So give them the tools they need to get started, and then that will allow some flexibility in planning for the next part.” He pauses. “If the numbers don’t balance, then more humans *will* need to be brought into it, Stef.”

Ugh. What an awful thought. Let’s distract from that. “Dinner?”

Wil chuckles and stands, then hauls me up with him. “Dinner.”



IT'S NOT until we're snuggled in bed later, after dinner, a long debate on how to handle things while we work out what today's intruder was after, and a couple of hours of television, that I remember what Wil asked me last night.

I've been avoiding thinking about it. If people know we're together, that my life begins and ends with him, that he's important and valuable to me... then he becomes a target. He becomes a way to hurt me. And I can't risk that. I can't risk his health and safety and happiness that way. It's bad enough that every day he lives a life surrounded by ordinary dangers: people driving cars, irresponsible idiots with firearms, runaway reindeer with their sharp antlers... stampeding shoppers. Inattentive window cleaners on skyscrapers who drop things. Food service staff with poor hygiene. Not that we're susceptible to food poisoning, really, but it's still a risk. And that's before I factor in that Wil works in security. If someone was to make an attempt on Brandt or Percy, that would put him in the line of fire.

There are so many threats to him already; how can I possibly paint a target on him too?

That's your paranoia talking, whispers a voice that sounds a lot like Wil. I glance over at his sleeping face on the pillow beside me. Maybe he's right. Maybe it *is* safe now. Éibhear is dead. He was tried, sentenced, and executed. I saw him die. I witnessed the king invoking the soul-death spell at his trial; watched as Caolan blasted a hole through his torso. Saw him fall, dead for the last time, dead for all eternity, never to be reincarnated. It's a punishment only three people ever in the history of all dragons and elves have been sentenced to, but if anyone deserved it, it was him.

Unfortunately, his death doesn't change the fact that he lives on in my nightmares. No matter how hard I try, the memories of those centuries in his power won't let me go.

Nothing is safe. No one, and nowhere. Trust nobody. When you think you're safe, that maybe this time it will be okay... that's when you learn you're wrong. And it always hurts.

But pain doesn't always have to be physical.

Beside me, Wil stirs. "Stef?" he murmurs, reaching through the tangle of covers to take my hand.

"I'm okay. Go back to sleep." I can't hurt him with this. He wants us to tell the world we're together because he loves me. But it's because of how much I love him that we never can.

How fucked-up is that? I want to give him everything his heart desires, but the very depth of my love for him means that the one thing he wants, I can't give him.

He rolls to face me and studies my face in the shadowy light. "Paranoia?"

I shake my head. "Just memories. I'm okay."

His lips meet mine in a soft, gentle reminder that those times are behind me, and I cuddle closer to him, our breath mingling.

"Do you need your hoard?" he asks softly, and I spare a thought to the tiny smocked dress that's next on the pile to embellish. I planned to give it a border of cherries in a bold red silk to complement the lemon color of the fabric. My fingers itch to hold the needle and let my brain switch off for a while, let go of every thought except where the next stitch needs to be.

But it's only ever temporary, and I need a good night's sleep right now. I'm better off here, snuggled with Wil, than I would be sitting up half the night.

"No. Just hold me."

His lips quirk into a smile. "Always."

And he does.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

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Wil

WE CIRCLE THE ESTATE, and a tiny part of me that's been clenched tight for the past few days finally relaxes. It's good to be home.

And not that I'd ever tell Stef, but knowing the frankly ridiculous security setup Brandt will be behind in just a few minutes—missile launchers included—is a relief.

Steffen finishes scanning with his magic and signals to Brandt, who swoops down to land. As required by protocol, I pace him all the way down and shift as soon as I've landed, while Stef covers us from above in case there's an aerial attack. By whom, I have no idea, but it's a simple enough thing to allow him to do and prevents his paranoia from gaining a foothold.

Once I'm back in biped form, I magically scan the area again—all clear, but Fabian and Rhys and Dustin and Rob are already here, surprisingly—then turn to help Percy down from Brandt's back while Steffen lands. I do allow myself a second to admire his dragon form, which is just as sleek and gorgeous as his biped. The green of his scales is deeper and darker than it was when we met, but I love this sign of maturity on him.

“Got your legs?” I ask Percy, reaching out to steady him. The flight wasn't long enough for his legs to go numb, but I always check anyway. I've never ridden dragonback before, what with being a dragon myself, but it's pretty common for people to need a second to regain their balance after, no matter how many times they've done it.

“I’m good, thank you.” He smiles at me, then slides a glance over to where Steffen is just alighting on the lawn. “What we talked about the other day...”

“It’s fine,” I assure him. It’s likely he’s heard about the issues Stef had in the meeting, but maybe not the follow-up. “He’s fixed it.”

Percy nods. “Good. If there’s anything I can do, anytime...”

Once more, I have the strangest feeling that he knows. He can’t, though. Steffen and I have kept this secret for four thousand years. And if he knew, wouldn’t he come right out and say so? “Thank you. Things aren’t going as smoothly as usual, with this security scare. But we should be fine.”

It’s been nearly three days, but we’re not substantially closer to discovering who tried to hack my phone. CSG security narrowed it down to a shortlist, but none of those people have motive—or the knowledge—to attempt the breach. We’re currently split between wanting to closely interrogate them and wanting to watch them to see what happens next. Both sides have pros and cons, so it was decided to take the weekend to consider it.

Percy and I move away from Brandt, and he and Steffen shift back.

“Home, sweet home,” Brandt sings, slinging an arm around Percy’s shoulders and beaming up at the house. “It’s always so good to be home.”

Steffen scowls. “You could have been here three days ago if you weren’t so determined to make me crazy,” he mutters, and Brandt laughs.

“You can’t hide me in a fortress anytime someone looks at me the wrong way,” he chides. “I have a responsibility to my people to lead them.”

“You also have a responsibility to them not to die,” the love of my life retorts, but he’s not serious. It’s hard to tell sometimes when he’s kidding around, since his frowning,

surly expression remains the same, but once you get to know him, it becomes easier.

Brandt blows him a kiss and heads toward the terrace. We follow, and as I walk alongside Steffen, so close, every atom in me yearns to reach out. It doesn't have to be a big touch... maybe just a brush of pinkie fingers. Something that happens by accident.

But I don't. He set this boundary a long time ago, and I agreed to it. Do I think it needs to be renegotiated? Yes. Will I continue to work on him, to convince him to change his mind? Absolutely. But I won't betray his trust by violating the boundary without his consent.

Inside, Brandt and Percy go upstairs to change, and I turn to Stef. "Want me to come with you?" He's going to do a security check of the whole house. It's always the first thing he does when he gets here, even though he's been monitoring the extensive electronic and magical security systems from afar all week.

He shakes his head. "You skipped lunch. Go and get a snack to tide you over until dinner."

Not going to argue with that. This potential security breach has turned my normal workload into a mountain the likes of which is too high to fly over. We part ways, and I head to the kitchen.

"...and then David sent us all an email that said Steffen had reconsidered Imani's first concept and believed parts of it could work with some changes. Imani called me before I'd even finished reading the email," Sophie says confidently as I pause in the doorway. She glances up from where she's talking to Dustin and Fabian at the table while they peel potatoes under Kethe's stern eye. Since they got all coupled-up, the troublesome twosome has expressed interest in learning to cook. The story I heard is that their significant others tried to teach them, but it didn't go all that well. Hence Kethe taking over... and watching them closely.

Although... is it even possible to fuck up peeling potatoes?

“Dammit!” Dustin cries, dropping the knife and the potato. My eyes widen and I shout a warning as the knife clatters to the tabletop, bounces, and sails off toward Fabian. My magic lashes out, but Kethe’s is faster, freezing the knife midair, perilously close to Fabian’s neck.

Fabian, clueless as he is, doesn’t seem to notice, focused on the potato in his hand. “Well, that’s great news. The sooner we can get started, the sooner we might start to see an improvement.” Kethe leans between them and grabs the knife, pulling it safely away, and Fabian turns to look. “What are you doing with that? You should be more careful, Kethe. Knife safety is very important.”

I take two quick steps and grab the hand he’s holding his own knife with before he accidentally slices off a finger. He glances up at me, then down at the knife. “What?”

“If you’re using a knife, do *not* take your eyes off it,” I warn him.

“It was just for a second!” he protests. “I had to see why Kethe was pointing a knife at me.”

My gaze meets Kethe’s. “Were knives a good idea?”

She sighs and shakes her head. “I’ll get some of those vegetable peelers with the safety blades,” she concedes.

“Um, hello?” Dustin demands. “Doesn’t anyone care that I’m bleeding?”

Shit. I forgot about what caused this whole kerfuffle to begin with. While Sophie grabs his hand and inspects the cut, Kethe takes possession of both knives and puts them in the sink. “At least they were nearly done,” she says philosophically.

Sophie finishes healing Dustin’s cut, and while Fabian carries the peeled potatoes over to the counter, Dustin cleans the blood from the table. The cut must have been a good one, because there’s a lot of it.

“Kethe, do we wash the bloody potatoes?” Fabian asks, returning to the table and hovering over the unpeeled, blood-spattered root vegetables. I hold in a laugh. When I was still a

soldier and ran short on rations, we ate some truly disgusting things, but I don't ever remember blithely thinking I'd just wash the blood of my friend off something and eat it.

Although if the potatoes are going to be peeled first...

The look Kethe gives me this time promises murder, so I hurry to intervene. "Fabian, let me finish that. Could you make me some tea and a sandwich? I missed lunch."

Fabian lights up with joy at being asked to fix my snack, even if it is as simple as a sandwich. "Of course!" He abandons the remaining potatoes to my tender mercies and beelines to the fridge. "You shouldn't skip meals, you know," he chides, and we all stop and stare at him. Nobody skips more meals than him, usually because he's so caught up in whatever he's doing that he forgets food exists.

He turns to face us with his arms full of food and blinks. "What?"

"Nothing," Sophie says. "Could I have a sandwich too?"

"Dinner is in two hours," Kethe reminds us. "Make them small sandwiches. I don't cook just because it smells nice."

"But it does smell nice when you cook," Dustin assures her, throwing a wad of bloody paper towels away and grabbing the bottle of disinfectant spray. "Your food smells like home and good feelings. When I cook, it smells like rotten feet."

Note to self: don't accept an invitation to dinner at Dustin and Rob's place.

I finish separating the potatoes into bloody and not-bloody and carry them over to the counter. I'm not sure what Kethe actually wants to do with the bloody ones—scrub and peel, plant for the future, throw away—but I'm not stupid enough to ask her right now. She doesn't like us messing around in her kitchen anyway, so it's safer to leave them for her to deal with when she's ready.

I return to the newly cleaned and disinfected table just as Fabian presents me with a decent-looking sandwich and a steaming mug of tea. "Thank you."

He hovers while I take the first bite. Thankfully, there's no weird flavor combination that makes me want to spit it out, so I give him a thumbs-up while I chew, then swallow and smile. "This is great."

Beaming, he retakes his seat at the table.

"So the plan is moving ahead?" Dustin asks, returning to the conversation that was interrupted by his flyaway knife.

"Yes." Sophie nods. "Steffen has tentatively approved a preliminary plan for the first stage. He said that's the most low-risk part, and we should start with it while we work on the planning for more difficult stages." She snorts. "Imani went from wanting to kill him to wanting to have his babies within two days. Her words."

Excuse me very fucking much?

I push down my instinctive desire to make a snarky retort and keep my face blank. Internally, though, I add Imani—who's the Sophie of CSG—to my mental list of people I wouldn't tell if they had spinach in their teeth. It might be petty, but it gives me great satisfaction.

"Can you imagine Stef as a dad?" Fabian muses.

"Yes," Kethe and I say in unison, and then exchange startled glances. Her gaze warms approvingly. She may not know exactly what happened to Stef all those years ago, but she still recognizes what a good person he is.

"Steffen would be an excellent father," she continues. "Although very overprotective. He'd need a co-parent to temper that."

That's putting it mildly.

"He does care a lot about us all," Dustin adds. "But his kid would probably be swaddled in bubble wrap."

"He didn't swaddle you in bubble wrap," I point out. "Even though all the many, many, many wild shenanigans you got up to caused him endless misery." Dustin was still a relatively young fledgling when his parents died and Brandt took him in to raise. Steffen had only been in charge of

security for a few decades at that point, and there was a lot of upheaval while he adjusted to having such an exuberant child around. I was still a soldier back then, so thankfully I missed a lot of it. Not that Dustin changed all that much until recently.

He grins. “I’m kind of ashamed of it now, but I did some of that stuff just to annoy him.”

“I know,” Stef says dryly from the doorway. “It’s not like you tried to hide it.”

Dustin’s grin becomes sheepish. “Oops?”

Stef shrugs and gets himself a glass. “Trying to keep up with you sharpened my skills.” He fills the glass at the tap, then leans back against the counter and studies us all. “What are you talking about?”

“Fatherhood,” Fabian says. “There’s a woman at CSG who wants to have your babies.”

The split second of shock on Stef’s face is a rare sight. He gets himself back under control quickly, but we all see it. “Who?”

“That’s not important,” Sophie interjects quickly. “Uh... unless it interests you?”

What the fuck? I barely stop myself from spinning to glare at Sophie. This isn’t her fault. As far as she knows, Stef’s single and potentially interested in this woman.

Yet another reason I wish we could come out to our friends.

CHAPTER NINE

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Steffen

“WHY WOULD a complete stranger want to have my children?” I ask, instantly suspicious. “How well do you know her? Could she be a sleeper agent attempting to breed dragons for experimentation?”

Dustin snorts. “Dude, if that was the case, why would she pick you to father them instead of someone less likely to suspect her?”

“She’s trying to lull us all into a false sense of security. If she can convince me that she’s not a risk, none of the rest of you have a chance of stopping her when the time comes.” I’m so disappointed that he can’t see that. Not surprised, but disappointed. All these years, and he still can’t assess a basic risk.

“Are we really talking about some random woman conning Steffen into being her baby daddy in order to further a plot to conduct genetic experiments on dragons?” Wil wonders, and I sneak a glance at him. There’s no way ever I’d have dragonets with anyone other than him—not that I’ll be having any. The risk is so great, I feel sick just thinking about it. But of course, I can’t say any of that.

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss it,” I warn. “Just because it’s unlikely doesn’t mean it won’t happen.” I can see Wil’s not happy with the direction the conversation’s taken, but I’m not sure if that’s because he doesn’t like the thought of me having dragonets with someone else or because he’s worried my paranoia is taking over. It’s not: although this scenario *is*

possible, it's dependent on me choosing to have a child with this random woman, which makes it so unlikely, I can let it go.

“Okay, let's not get carried away. I'm pretty sure she doesn't *really* want to have your babies.” Sophie pauses. “Maybe? I know it's an expression to convey appreciation, but it's gotta be based in something, right?”

“None of that matters unless Stef wants to have babies with her,” Fabian points out, and they all turn to look at me. “Are you looking for someone to have dragonets with, Steffen? And if so, what's your type? I have about a million people I can set you up with.”

I frown. “Set me up with? What do you mean?”

“I can introduce you to people to date.” He squints. “Are you opposed to people I've slept with in the past? Because if so, the list gets a lot shorter.”

I gape at him. “Date? People? Me?” I'm so shocked, my paranoia hasn't even kicked in to point out all the things that could go wrong if I was dating random people Fabian once had sex with.

Dustin sighs. “I guess that's a no, then. Too bad. It would be nice for you to have someone who loves you.”

My gaze is drawn toward Wil, but I can't give myself away like that, so I turn my head the other way and glance down the counter.

And freeze.

“What's that?” Is that blood? I inhale deeply. Dragon blood. Dustin's, I think. I don't know how I didn't smell it before. Maybe because there's not that much, just a few spatters across some... potatoes?

I whirl to face the others. “What happened here? Why were you talking about hatchlings? Did someone try to steal your genetic material?” I take two long steps and pull Dustin from his chair. “Have you been threatened? Is there an intruder in the house?” There can't be—all my security is safely in place. I'd *know*.

Except... every system has weaknesses. There is a fail rate.

But surely if someone had broken in and threatened Dustin, he or Wil or *someone* would have found a way to communicate that to me? Unless that's what the whole fatherhood conversation was about. Were they trying to warn me?

I lean in close and whisper, "Is there a woman from CSG in the house trying to steal your blood to create babies?" It's not possible to create a dragonet that way, but we don't talk about our young a lot with other species. There are so few of us, and our method of conception isn't what they expect. Maybe this woman thinks she can—

"Nobody's in the house," Dustin says forcefully, his gaze locked on my face. "Steffen, there is no threat. I cut myself peeling potatoes."

"Steffen," Wil says from two feet away. He gets slowly to his feet, and a tiny voice in my brain tells me he's being careful because he's concerned I'll perceive him as a threat. That more than anything else they could do cuts through the paranoia running rampant in my brain. Wil should never be afraid I'll hurt him. "Stef, I was here. I saw the whole thing. Dustin cut himself with the knife because he wasn't paying attention. The blood got all over the table and the potatoes. You can probably still smell the disinfectant."

I inhale again, and sure enough, the table smells strongly of the cleaner Kethe keeps under the sink.

This is just my paranoia. This is just my paranoia. This is just my paranoia.

I have to force my fingers to open and let Dustin go. "Are you okay now?" I make myself ask. Part of me still wants to lock all of them in a room with a guard on the door and do a sweep of the house, but I know they wouldn't appreciate that, so I push the urge aside and try to ignore the twitchy feeling it gives me.

“I’m fine,” he promises, then hesitates. “Thank you for trying to protect us.”

The paranoid thoughts trying to creep back into my brain... stop. It’s the strangest thing. That’s never happened before. Usually I need my hoard before I can wrestle it back under control.

“You’re... welcome.”

Dustin looks at me for a moment longer before his adorable, sunny smile appears. “So, back to you dating... are you sure you don’t want to? Now that I’m all loved-up, I want everyone else to be too.”

I scoff and turn away, my gaze catching on Wil. He still looks concerned, unsure whether he needs to stage a distraction and let me get to my hoard, but as always, he follows my lead. I understand, suddenly, why he wants to tell people about us. The words burn in the back of my throat... I could claim him now, show them all that I have someone who loves me. The best someone. That I don’t need to be set up on dates with random people, because the only one for me is right here.

I swallow them down. The risk is too great.

“Maybe if you weren’t so distracted by being loved-up, you wouldn’t have cut yourself before,” Kethe says, speaking for the first time since I entered the kitchen. I glance over at her as I return to my spot by the sink. She looks back at me, her gaze assessing. Kethe has known me since shortly after Brandt saved me. She doesn’t know anything about that time except that I was a mess when he brought me home, and it took weeks before I’d so much as be in a room alone with her. But she never got impatient. Never got angry. Has never shown me anything except understanding and kindness.

If I’d had a mother, I’d have wanted her to be like Kethe.

She gives me a tiny nod, satisfied I’m okay, then turns to glare at Dustin. “You’ll never learn to cook if you don’t pay attention. Or you’ll set the kitchen on fire like Fabian did.”

“It was an accident,” Fabian protests. “It could have happened to anyone.”

That gets him a lot of scoffs, since the fire started when he put the roll of paper towels in the hot oven instead of the tray of chicken (that was later found in the pantry where the paper towels should have been).

“Well, none of you are doing any cooking tonight,” Kethe declares. “You can help with the washing up, though.”

Wil carries a plate to the sink and stacks it in the dishwasher. “On that note, I’m going to grab a shower. Stef, can I borrow you first?”

“Of course.” I follow him out of the kitchen, but we don’t speak until we’re out of earshot—and he keeps his voice low.

“Are you okay?”

I nod. “Yes. It... wasn’t that bad.” I frown. That doesn’t feel like the truth, and I don’t lie to Wil. I know he goes out of his way to be as honest with me as he can, to prove I can trust him, and it seems only fair that I return the favor. “I mean... it was bad. But then it... went away.”

He stops walking at the foot of the stairs. “It did what?”

The more I think about it, the odder—and scarier—it seems. I mentally check all my mind traps, but none of them have been tripped. “All the thoughts were still there, and then they just backed off. They’re still there, like they always are, but they don’t seem urgent? I can tell that they’re not real. Just paranoia.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose thoughtfully. “That’s interesting. Did you think something or do something right before they backed off?”

I cast my mind back, and as always, the visuals of my memories play out in my brain like a movie. “Not that I can... hm.” I scroll backward and forward through the few seconds that caught my attention. “Dustin thanked me. That’s when they stopped.”

Wil nods slowly and starts up the stairs, and I keep pace with him. “He thanked you for protecting us, right?”

“For trying to,” I correct. I’m not sure if that’s relevant, but details are important.

“Has anyone ever done that before?”

The question hangs between us for a moment. “Yes,” I answer finally. “Brandt often thanks me for my work.” I think about it a bit more. “But I don’t think anyone’s thanked me when the paranoia was in control?” Which makes sense, since those are the times when the conspiracy theories I’m spouting are amusing or annoying to them, rather than me protecting them from real threats.

Even though they *could* be real.

“Maybe that’s it,” he suggests. “Maybe your paranoia just needs to be acknowledged. It’s trying to keep us all safe, and we constantly slap it down. Maybe we should try thanking it for trying before we... slap it down.” He frowns, obviously not happy with how that thought ended.

It sounds weird to me too. “Does paranoia even work that way?” I wonder. There’s no way to know the answer, of course. My paranoia is unlike the condition experienced by humans and other Earth species. I am the only dragon in recorded history—and we have a lot of that—to ever experience a mental health disorder. I wasn’t born with it; I have memories from a time before paranoia ruled my life. Our—my and Wil and Brandt and Sophie’s—best guess is that it’s a trauma response to my life before Brandt found me. When you learn over and over again that nothing is safe, your brain apparently changes to anticipate that.

All that means we’re basically flying blind. We have no way of knowing how my paranoia will react to any given situation except through trial and error. When we first came to Earth, I tried several of the drugs most commonly prescribed for humans with similar symptoms, but none were effective. My dragon physiology is too different from those of Earth species.

Wil shrugs. “We’ll find out, won’t we?” We reach our floor, and I look around. As much as we both love being at Here Be Dragons, our time together here is very limited. Since nobody knows about us, we can’t share rooms, and we have to be careful about sneaking around. We chose rooms next to each other to make it easier, with the idea that we’d eventually install a hidden door, but we haven’t had the opportunity to make that happen. Construction is hard to undertake in secret when the house is full of people. The one time we tried to use magic to do it, Fabian came wandering in to ask what spell we were working on. It was a nightmare come to life for me, and I haven’t been able to bring myself to try again since.

Brandt and Percy are nowhere in sight, and everyone else is downstairs, so I follow Wil into his room for some quiet time together.

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CHAPTER TEN

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Wil

“WIL! GOT A SEC?”

I pause midway along the gallery and glance back. Rhys is walking toward me purposefully. “Good morning. What’s up?” Since we’re both on our way downstairs to go for a run—together—I assume this is something he wants to discuss out of anyone else’s earshot. I wait for him to catch up, and then we continue toward the stairs.

“No pressure or anything, but Brandt suggested I ask if you’re interested in joining the study. We’re still a bit light on dragons who are casually dating.”

“Er...” Dammit. “I’m happy to join, but I’m... uh...” ...*in a monogamous relationship* is how that sentence should end, but of course I can’t say that. I’ve always been very careful to give the impression I’m not ready to settle down. It keeps my friends from trying to set me up... the way they did yesterday with Steffen. Interestingly, that’s the first time ever anyone’s tried to matchmake Stef. I can’t say I cared for it that much. “Does it matter how much sex I’m having?” I ask instead, trying to get an idea of whether this is likely to give me away.

“Not really. If you stop for three months, the monitoring ring will deactivate, but otherwise, any and all sexual activity gives us more information.”

I hesitate, and he stops on the first-floor landing and turns to face me. “Please don’t feel like you have to. It’s absolutely fine if you’d rather not.”

“Yeah, it’s not that.” I really should have signed up for this study months ago. He’s doing good work—important work—and it’s as noninvasive as things can get. But I know the idea of someone monitoring how often I have sex is going to be a trigger for Steffen. “The thing is, I’ve been... uh, seeing someone. We’re not telling people,” I add hastily when he smiles big. “It’s not... there yet.” Those words are bitter on my tongue, given how long we’ve been together and how committed we are, but I push on. “So I’d want to discuss this with him first, since it affects his privacy as well.”

“Of course,” Rhys says instantly. “We have a protocol in place when one person in a relationship signs up and the other doesn’t. Let me get all the paperwork for you to look at together, and if you have any questions, I’m happy to answer them. And of course if your boyfriend is uncomfortable with you signing up, there are no hard feelings.”

“Thanks, Rhys. Um... I hate to ask, but like I said, we’re keeping it quiet, so... could you not tell Fabian?”

He grins. “That’s fine. Since it’s work-related, I ethically can’t tell him anyway.” He snorts. “Although there’s a fifty-fifty chance that he wouldn’t be paying attention if I did tell him. You know what Fabian’s like.”

I chuckle along with him, because it’s totally true. “Is he working?” We turn toward the back of the house. Stef should be there already, waiting for us.

“Yep. He woke up at about three with this big idea, and he’s been in the living archive ever since. I’ll drag him down for breakfast in a bit.” He stops midway down the hall and lowers his voice. “I’m happy for you, Wil. I hope this works out. We don’t know each other that well yet, but if you need someone to talk to, I hope you’ll confide in me.”

My smile feels a bit strained. I know he means well, but it burns to have him say it. His relationship with Fabian is only around six months old. It’s so new, it squeaks still. I’ve been with Steffen for literally thousands of years. If anyone should be offering relationship advice, it’s me.

On the other hand, he and Fabian are openly together, and the people closest to me and Stef are offering to set him up with other people. So maybe some advice wouldn't hurt. If I can think of a way to do it without giving any details away.

"Thank you. I really appreciate that." He might be the safest person to talk to, after all, what with being the newest member of our little group. He's the least likely to put the details together and guess Stef is my secret boyfriend.

He claps me on the shoulder. "Let's go clear the cobwebs."



"WE'RE GOING FLYING," Brandt insists stubbornly, glaring at Steffen.

My beloved shakes his head. "No."

"Yes."

"No. It's too risky. There's a threat right now."

Brandt throws up both hands and rolls his eyes, reminding me an awful lot of Dustin in full dramatic mode. We consider Brandt to be (mostly) sensible, but the fact is that he's tens of thousands of years older than most of us. I'm pretty sure young Brandt was just as much trouble and high drama as his grandson is. Though, to Dustin's credit, he has started to settle down lately.

Somewhat.

"The threat isn't to *me*," Brandt declares. "And there's been no sign that it was anything more than someone trying out their skills."

Yeah. No.

"Brandt," I begin, but he's already shaking his head.

"I know, I know. It was a real attempt to access secure data and it needs to be taken seriously. I agree. I do. But why should someone trying to steal information be a reason I can't take Percy flying?"

“It’s a security risk,” Stef repeats. There’s no hint of impatience in his tone. “We don’t know what information they were trying to access. What if it was your schedule because they’re planning to kidnap you?”

Brandt draws himself up to his full height. “Ex-fucking-cuse you. Are you saying some random rabble would actually have a chance of kidnapping me? I was an elite soldier and scholar before you even hatched!”

I wince internally. Any reference to the circumstances of Stef’s hatching or childhood is risky. I hope he holds it together.

Brandt seems to realize what he’s said, because he visibly deflates and bites his lip. He can’t apologize for being insensitive, because then Percy—who’s watching avidly with Sophie—will wonder what the big deal is.

Fortunately, Steffen skips right over it. “And as an elite soldier, what would you tell your charge in this situation?”

Folding his arms across his chest and pouting, Brandt concedes. “It’s not fair,” he mutters. I pat him on the shoulder.

“What if Steffen went with you? At a discreet distance, of course.”

They both swing to stare at me, Brandt with hope, Stef with consternation.

“I’m too bus—”

“That would be okay!”

They speak at the same time, then glare at each other.

“How can you be too busy to look after your charge?” Brandt demands.

Percy coughs lightly. “Less diva, maybe? We’re asking Steffen to do us a favor.”

I rub my nose to hide my grin. Stef’s toast now. Percy has this way of gently and politely asking for something, and even if you’re determined to say no, you somehow always end up doing it.

“I don’t know if I have time today,” Steffen says, but for the first time during this argument, there’s a note of uncertainty in his voice. He shoots me a pleading look.

Sorry, love. A long flight would be good for him. He doesn’t like to leave Brandt for long periods of time, so he rarely goes out without him. We dragons need to fly. “Sure you do. I can handle anything that comes up here.”

Brandt cheers, and the look Stef gives me this time is much less pleading and much more a promise of retribution. He’ll get over it once he’s up in the air. He’d just rather Brandt and Percy stayed here, with the missile launchers to keep them safe.

Percy, ever the peacemaker, smiles at Steffen. “We won’t go far,” he promises. “We’ll stay nice and high and keep the distortion shield up the whole time. Don’t you want to stretch your wings?”

“We flew here last night,” Stef grumbles, but he’s weakening. A short, direct flight from A to B barely counts as a flight.

“Consider it a medical order,” Sophie says cheerfully. “You haven’t had enough flight time recently, Steffen. As the species healer, I insist you take a nice long flight this afternoon.”

Stef sighs. “Fine. Give me half an hour.” He avoids looking at any of us and walks purposefully from the room.

Brandt winces slightly. “We probably shouldn’t have ganged up on him.”

“He’s used to it.” I don’t think his paranoia played a part in this, anyway. There really is a credible potential threat at the moment, and I agree with him that Brandt and Percy shouldn’t go for a flight completely unguarded. The chances of anything happening are very slim, and even slimmer that Brandt wouldn’t be able to handle any attacker himself, but those chances still exist. So yeah, Stef’s right, but that doesn’t mean he gets to lock his charge and himself up until this is over.

“Let’s wait for him outside,” Sophie suggests. “It’s a gorgeous day.”

“I’ll meet you there; I want to grab a sweater,” Percy says. “It’ll be cooler in the air.”

I’ve never thought about it that way, but I guess it would be? I’m always the one doing the flying, so I wouldn’t know.

Brandt decides we need drinks, so he wanders off to the kitchen, and Sophie and I go through the sunroom to the terrace. It really is a gorgeous spring day: the sky is a clear, impossible blue, the sun shining warmly down. We settle onto the comfy outdoor sofas, and I look out over the garden and try not to sigh. Earth is lovely, and I do like it here. Plus, I’ll be forever grateful that we got this second chance—that we weren’t all annihilated when our dimension collapsed. But sometimes, when Earth is at its best, I can’t help but mourn my home. It will never shine at its best again.

“I miss orange grass,” Sophie says, as though reading my mind, and I reach over to squeeze her hand. “Do you think he cared at all what it would come to? Éibhear?”

Rage builds in me like magma in a volcano, but I tamp it down. All of us who had to flee to Earth hate Éibhear, but unlike nearly everyone else, my hatred is only partly because of what he did to our home. The rest is because of what he did to Steffen.

But Sophie doesn’t know every detail of that like I do.

“I don’t,” I say honestly. “He could have stopped. Once we knew what was causing it, he could have stopped. For selfish reasons, he chose not to. And then when he knew it was beyond repair, he made plans to leave us all to die and do it all again here on Earth.” There’s a faint tremor in my voice, and I take a breath. He’s dead. Forever dead. But I can’t let my anger go, not while I see every day the trauma he left behind.

“I don’t understand that,” Sophie admits, staring into the trees. Birdsong fills the air around us, a harmonious, if odd, backdrop to our troubled memories. “I don’t understand how he could...” She trails off and shakes her head, and I squeeze

her hand again. Most of us have the same trouble reconciling what Éibhear did... and how he had so many supporters.

“Why are we so glum?” Brandt asks as he joins us with a tray of glasses and a pitcher of something that looks cool and fruity. Kethe likes to experiment with different fruits and flavors in carbonated water. So far, the only one that was a definite thumbs down was the smashed banana and bay leaves combo. That was just... weird.

I see berries in the pitcher, though, so I think this one will be okay.

“Just memories,” I tell him, accepting a glass, and he smiles wistfully.

“The nice days can be the hardest,” he says, echoing my earlier thoughts. “But at least we’re safe now.”

“And Earth is beautiful,” Sophie adds, rallying and lifting her glass in salute. “I think I’m just going to loll out here in the sun until you get back.”

Impulse has me saying, “I’ll join you.” I’d intended to spend some time with my hoard of mechanical puzzles, but I’m already inside so often. Fresh air will do me good. Besides, Stef will spend most of the evening working on one of his art pieces, so I can indulge myself then. “We’ll soak up the sunshine and drink fancy water and gossip.”

She clinks glasses with me. “Yes. And the first thing I want to talk about is whether you think Stef is ready to date. Because I know someone who’d be perfect for him.”

Fuck my life.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

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Steffen

IT'S BEEN three weeks since I suggested we could move forward with the plans to reintroduce humans to magic, and I regret it with every fiber of my being.

Wil laughed when I said as much last night, then gave me a blowjob and told me how proud he was of me. So now I have conflicted feelings. I still regret it deeply, but the hope for regular BJs makes the whole thing bearable. He's been very affectionate and sexually attentive since that weekend when Fabian suggested I should start dating. He says that Sophie also talked about setting me up with people. I'm not sure why they think I'd want that, but Wil's feeling very possessive as a result, and I'm reaping the benefits. Between him keeping me up half the night and work keeping me busy all day, I'm walking around in a satisfied, exhausted state of being. It's nice.

But I still hate this whole teach-humans-magic thing. More than ever now, since it's screwed with my schedule. The first week after we green-lighted the plan was spent with me putting together a team of people to do the security checks and training them to my specifications. If it was up to me, we'd still be training, but apparently I'm too demanding and need to get on with it. The time crunch is kind of important, so I let it go.

The second week, we began the security checks and interviews. Well, when I say "we," I mean I did three and then David asked me not to do any more unless someone wanted me to sit in. Something about the humans being intimidated by

me. They obviously don't understand the gravity of this situation. So now the team is doing the interviews under my supervision while I do the rest of the screening. I do enjoy not having to talk to the humans, but I also worry that if they're not intimidated, maybe my team isn't being thorough enough. Of the roughly four hundred humans we've investigated, only a dozen were of legitimate concern to me. Given that this first round is supposedly very close family, that's within what I'd decided was an acceptable number. We're looking into those people further, because they already know about the community and are therefore a risk.

Those remaining were told in general terms that a recent historical discovery had led to the information that humans had once been magic-capable, and then invited—and strongly encouraged—to learn about it. The real reason is staying a closely guarded secret. The last thing we need is widespread panic, or worse, for someone to decide to prevent humans from learning magic in a convoluted and long-reaching plan to wipe out all community species. The chances of that happening are fairly low, but it's still possible, so I'm keeping an ear out for any whisper of a plot.

Most of the humans jumped on the chance to learn magic, and their classes started this week. The early stages are mostly meditation and learning to feel the life force, but the instructors are on the hunt for people who learn fast and can possibly be brought in as instructors down the track. We have very few magic-competent humans at the moment, and we need as many as possible rolling out this training.

There were nineteen humans who said they'd rather not learn magic, even after they were assured it was safe. I'm investigating them further, too, although nobody else knows that. There's something not right when your wife and stepkids are demons but you have no interest in learning any form of magic yourself. These people might have passed the screening, but that's just a sign that my team isn't being thorough enough. There's something going on that we need to know about.

The training for the first few hundred began this week, and we're screening the next group now. Everyone involved in the program, no matter what stage they're working on, is under strict instructions to call me if one of the humans behaves erratically. I still think this whole thing is a mistake, and when it blows up in our faces, I'm going to be ready.

“Steffen?”

I look up at the doorway where one of my team is hovering. I'm alone in the office while Wil handles the daily briefing with our dragon security team, and more than anything, I wish I could be there with him, handling my day-to-day. But at the same time, there's nobody I'd really trust to manage the security for this human debacle properly, so I'm not passing it on to someone else.

“Yes?”

She hesitates. “I think you should come and talk to this guy.”

That pricks my interest. Since I stopped doing interviews, there have been only nine that I've been consulted on. Five of those were just an after-the-fact conversation asking my opinion, but for four, I was asked to sit in on the remainder of the interview. Three of those are now on my list to check into further, and the other has been scheduled for a medical review with a human psychiatrist.

“Of course.” I lock my computer, put my phone in my pocket, and push back my chair. “What are your concerns?” I ask as I cross the room to join her. She steps back into the hall and waits while I lock the office. We didn't use to do that, but since the attempted hack—the perpetrator of which is still unknown—we've tightened things up. We don't think they got whatever they were looking for, so there's no point in making their second attempt easier.

Aroha—who's a demon and possibly the only person on the team whose training outcomes I was happy with—shrugs. “He's too serene. It sounds weird, but he's a human who's been called into an unexplained interview at CSG. Everyone else has been nervous or at least a tiny bit unsure. This guy...

he's completely calm. I haven't even brought the conversation around to the subject of his stepsister's abilities. We're still talking about his home life."

We head down the hall to where the on-site interviews are being held. We've been able to do many of them via video call, but for those people who live locally, we bring them in. Most of my team has heightened senses and prefer to be able to use them, which isn't possible with video.

"Name? Age?" I flip through my mental files, trying to remember who was on Aroha's schedule for the day.

"Chet Phillips, nineteen. College student, living at home with his mom and hellhound stepdad and stepsister. He was eleven when he learned about the community, and we've had no reported incidents concerning him." She puts the slightest stress on "reported," telling me she suspects there might have been some hiccups that Chet's stepdad didn't report to CSG. It happens sometimes—people prefer not to risk their new home life and instead put up with whatever the small problems are. They convince themselves it's a family problem and won't impact the community as a whole.

From what I've been told, this is a common background story in cases where CSG uncovers a plot endangering the community.

Still... Wil's warned me about jumping to conclusions. "If he's nineteen, he might just be an arrogant ass who can't imagine he's in any trouble," I counter, proud of myself for saying it. Even if I don't believe it. It's far more likely that he's involved in an underground cabal of humans with community relatives. They feel slighted by life and are planning to rise up and commit atrocities. I'm not sure of the details yet, but give me thirty minutes with this guy and I'll have them.

Aroha gives me a sidelong look, and I know she doesn't believe what I said either.

She pauses outside a small meeting room.

“Carry on the interview as usual,” I tell her. “I want to observe for a bit.”

“No problem.” Her smile is dark, and she takes a moment to smooth her ponytail so her horns are more prominent. I really like her.

She opens the door and precedes me into the room. I make sure the door closes, then take the seat beside her at the round table and study the teen sitting across from us. I know right away that I don’t like him. All my instincts are on high alert. I don’t know yet what he’s done, but it’s not good for us. This one is trouble.

He smirks at me, and even if he was just a harmless asshole of a teenager, I’d want to slap that expression off his face.

“Who’re you?” he demands. From the corner of my eye, I see Aroha’s lip twitch, and I know she’s enjoying this.

“John Smith,” I say coolly. No way am I telling this piece of shit my real name so he can steal my identity. “I’m here to observe.”

He leans back in his chair, still smirking, and folds his arms. “I don’t consent to this.”

“Your consent isn’t required,” Aroha tells him, and the thread of laughter in her voice is clear. For a split second, Chet’s smirk slips, revealing an ugly resentment. He doesn’t like having an attractive woman laugh at him—I’d say especially because she’s in charge.

Aroha’s finger taps minutely in the code I made them all learn, indicating that this reaction is new. Good. We’re getting somewhere already. He’ll be easy to break.

“I have rights,” he says. “You can’t keep me here.”

“You’re free to leave at any time, as I told you earlier.”

The switch from slightly belligerent to vulnerable and teary happens too fast to be real. Chet stares at us both with wide eyes and a trembling lower lip, and Aroha taps again, but I don’t need the warning. This kid is a solid actor, but my

instincts are screaming. My paranoia might get in the way a lot, but in situations of immediate danger, it always goes into hibernation, leaving my mind clear to react... and it's nowhere to be found now.

"You said I could leave but that if I did, you'd have to tell my mom's husband." His breath hitches. It's all very convincing, except his eyes are stone cold. "He'll... He doesn't like it when I'm in trouble."

Very good, kid. Hinting at something is often more impactful than outright saying it, especially when paired with his fake fear. He also said "mom's husband" instead of "stepfather," which paints a vivid picture of that relationship.

Unwavering, Aroha says, "That's the policy your mother signed on your behalf when she married into the community. You also signed it when you turned eighteen. We're only talking here, and I haven't asked you any highly personal questions. What's the problem?"

He stares at her for a second longer, flicks a glance at me, and then takes a deep breath as though calming himself down. "I'm sorry. I just... having someone else join us was unsettling. But at least he's human too."

It's not the first time someone's thought that. My glamour is excellent, and I keep it up at all times, even in these secure offices, whereas most others don't bother. This could work in our favor, so I don't correct him.

Aroha smiles, and even I want to lean away from her, it's so scary. I *really* like her.

"I'm sure," she says. "Now, we were talking about your current living situation. You said you didn't have any immediate plans to move out?"

His gaze flickers to me again, then back to her. "Nah. Rent is expensive, you know? Even the dorms aren't cheap. And my mom's house is comfortable."

I make a mental note of the way he refers to his home. I don't remember enough of his file to know if the house was his mother's before her marriage, but the fact that after eight

years he refers to it that way is... interesting. Not damning in and of itself, but interesting.

“I get it.” There’s sympathy in Aroha’s tone now. “My rent makes me want to hurl every month. But at least I don’t have to share a bathroom with my sisters anymore. You don’t mind still having your sister around?”

“Stepsister,” he corrects, which is also interesting. It’s true, of course, and since neither of them was a very small child when their families merged, it’s not even uncommon for him to think that way. But his response is so quick, as though he can’t bear for anyone to think they might be related by more than marriage. He’s definitely not a good risk for this program.

Whether he’s up to anything else... well, we’ll see.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

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Wil

THE OFFICE IS LOCKED when I get back, meaning Stef's elsewhere. I let myself in and take a second to slump in my desk chair. The last few weeks have been chaotic. With Steffen's focus split between Brandt's personal security and Operation: Survival (because yes, that stupid name stuck), managing all other aspects of dragon security has fallen to me. I'm not complaining—I love my job, and this is the kind of work I thrive on. But it technically is a two-person job, and there's only one of me.

Plus, being this busy means Stef and I have less time to just be together. There are fewer occasions where we're both working quietly at our desks, being in each other's company, and more and more we're having to bring work home in the evenings. When you add that to the fact that I've been a stupidly insecure and jealous idiot lately, it means I'm exhausted.

Not that I'm *sorry*, exactly, that Stef and I are having so much sex. It's basically the highlight of my day.

Smiling at the memory of last night, I reach for my mouse to wake my computer.

“Wil?”

Dammit. So close.

“What's up, Alistair?” He's practically bouncing, which is never a good sign.

“Are you coming to listen?”

“What?”

His grin takes up most of his face. “Steffen’s ripping this human kid to shreds.”

I stand so fast, my chair slides across the room and hits the wall. “*What?*”

“Pfft.” Alistair waves a hand as I pass him in the doorway, pulling the door closed and making sure it locks. “Not literally.”

Stopping, I give myself a second to sag against the wall in relief, then smack Alistair upside the head.

“Ow! What was that for?” He rubs the back of his head with an injured expression, even though I definitely didn’t hit him hard enough for it to hurt.

“You could have led with that. Where is he? And what’s going on?”

“I’m not sure you deserve to know now.” He sniffs exaggeratedly and folds his arms across his broad chest. The contrast of the fucking huge hellhound with the sulky child expression usually amuses me.

“I will squeeze the blood from your body,” I threaten, funneling my magic to whisper air along his skin. “It will *drip* from your *pores*.”

He narrows his eyes at me, then turns to lead me down the hall. “This way. But just so you know, I’ll remember this.”

“I have no doubt.” Mentally, I remind myself to check for booby traps for the next few weeks. Though, knowing Alistair, he might just subscribe me to a bunch of MLMs and flood me with marketing emails and text messages.

“I didn’t really think you’d hurt me,” he adds. “I just feel sorry for you, being left out. And I want to hear— EEEEEEP!” He shrieks as I skate a tendril of magic down the back of his neck, careening sideways into the wall to get away from me and slapping at the spot.

“Something wrong?” I ask innocently as heads poke out of doorways up and down the hall. As soon as they see Alistair,

they disappear again.

He glares at me as he regains his balance and straightens his clothes. “No. Nothing’s wrong. I had a bug on me.” He takes three more steps, then stops and whirls around. “If we weren’t friends, you would suffer for this.”

“If we weren’t friends, I would never have done it,” I assure him, and yep, he grins.

“Aww. Bro! The bonds of friendship overcome all.” He slings an arm around my shoulders and half drags me along. “We should go out for drinks. Me, Aidan, you... and why don’t you have a boyfriend?” He frowns. “Girlfriend? Why don’t I know what you’re into? Friends should know this shit. Have you even dated since we met?”

He’s getting kinda worked up about it, and I really don’t need him trying to set me up while Sophie’s trying to set Stef up, so I say, “Tell me again what’s happening?”

“What’s happening is that you’re single and it’s a crime!”

Yeah. No. “I mean with Steffen.”

He opens his mouth to respond, but I can already hear the murmur of a raised voice ahead. I glance in that direction and see a small group of people huddled near one of the meeting rooms. Mostly shifters and other species with enhanced hearing. This has to be it.

We join them, and Alistair asks, “What are they saying?”

“Shhh!” three different people hiss, and he rolls his eyes.

Inside the room, the raised voice is still talking. It sounds young, and definitely isn’t Steffen.

“...don’t know what it’s like! They’re always in my space and always so damn happy. Like... I can’t even play fucking music in my room because *she* comes in to dance with me. I don’t want to freaking dance!”

“Hellhounds can be overwhelming,” a woman says diplomatically, and I recognize the voice as one of the members of Stef’s project security team. Aroha, I think. The one he said he’d hire for our team if she was a dragon.

“Hellhounds are a damn nuisance,” Stef declares, and several people around me—including Alistair—gasp in offense. It’s kind of funny, because when you compare dragons to other species, we’re actually most like hellhounds. But Steffen finds all other species annoying... and most members of our species too. He’s just not a people person.

“Still, that’s not a reason to try to wipe them and six other species out,” he continues, and I let out a silent whistle. Has he actually uncovered a conspiracy here?

Please don’t let this be his paranoia, I beg. It would be so bad for him, professionally, if this proves to be unfounded. And I really don’t want to have to push my way into the room and talk him down.

But Aroha doesn’t react in any way, and the kid doesn’t seem confused or surprised by the comment, so... it seems Stef has just proved why he’s so damn good at his job.

“It’s not fair,” the kid bursts out. “Why should they be allowed to be special while we humans suffer?”

“That’s arrogant,” Alistair murmurs, and I have to agree. Has this guy forgotten who he’s talking to?

“What suffering are you referring to?” Steffen asks calmly. “You live in a five-bedroom home and have your college tuition and expenses paid by your family. Which includes your stepfather, a hellhound.”

“I mean the suffering of the human species as a whole,” the jackass proclaims. “We live under the thumb of these animals. C’mon, man... how can you not see it?”

I blink. Does he think Steffen’s human too? I glance at Alistair and see him looking back at me with the same surprised expression I’m sure is on my face. It’s not impossible, I guess—Aroha has demon horns that are probably on display here in the safety of our offices, but Stef only ever removes his glamor in our condo and at Here Be Dragons. Even then, he has the spell so ingrained, he can have it up in a fraction of a second.

But given many community members—including the hellhounds this kid is supposedly related to—look completely like humans, it's still a dumb assumption to make.

“I'm not sure I follow,” Stef says slowly, and I know he's thinking the same thing as me. “How are... we... under their thumb?”

“Oh, it doesn't seem like it.” The kid's voice is scornful now. He seems to think Steffen is wavering, considering switching sides. I almost feel sorry for him. He can't be that bright if he thinks it's that easy to sway a trained government agent while sitting in a government facility with another agent in the room.

On the other hand, he's seemingly part of a conspiracy that will kill his stepfamily and millions of others, so... my sympathy is limited.

“But the thing is, the ones we see and meet are just the shells. It's a *conspiracy*. There are these tunnels, see, that run under our cities, and that's where the big shots live. They kidnap kids and homeless people to feed on and manipulate our government to look the other way. They've infiltrated everywhere. Do your research—the signs are all there. I can introduce you to some people. Next month we're—” He stops abruptly, probably remembering that even if Steffen seems sympathetic, this isn't the place to reveal plans to wipe out the community.

Steffen heaves a sigh. I know it's him because I've heard that sigh many times. “Chet, you've put me in a very complicated and difficult situation here,” he begins. “I'm a paranoid conspiracy theorist. That's part of the reason I have this job and am so good at it. There is a part of my brain that analyzes every possible scenario that might exist and shows me the worst outcome there could be. That part of my brain has considered everything you've said and calculated that it *is* possible.”

There's an uneasy stirring through the group around me, but I'm not concerned. Stef's paranoia isn't in control here;

he's too matter-of-fact. Beside me, Alistair holds up his hands and whispers to the others, "Chill. My man Steffen's got this."

I've got to remember to send him chocolates or something later.

Inside the meeting room, the kid—Chet?—says, "See! This is what's actually happening. They've got people brainwashed, and the only way to free humanity is to take them all down."

"Right. But the thing is, while it's possible, the likelihood of it being true is miniscule."

There's an uneasy pause. "Miniscule?"

"So small, I'd have to put a lot of zeroes between the decimal and the one. A *lot* of zeroes. Now, that doesn't mean it isn't true. So that's why I want to hear about the proof you've got."

"Sure!" The kid's all excited again. "So the way it works is, the tunnels are all connected—"

"Which tunnels?"

Another pause. "The ones under the cities."

"Yes, but where are the entrances? How deep are they? Is there geothermal imaging to prove they exist?"

"Pfft. How can we know any of that when they're in the government, censoring everything? You don't get it, man. Everyone's in on it. Everyone you think you can trust."

"So there's no proof anywhere of this?" Steffen's voice is still strictly neutral.

"You gotta let me finish telling you. Once you hear it all, the pieces will fall into place."

"Yes. But it sounds like a long story, and I can't stay away from my office for much longer without people noticing. Tell me something I can validate this with. How can we know where to attack if nobody knows where the tunnel entrances are?"

There's another stirring around me, a reaction to the inclusive language Stef's using. Only Alistair stays rock-solid at my side. And presumably Aroha, since she doesn't say anything.

"Oh, that's the genius of it. We can't get to the tunnels, so we're going to lure them out. They'll come out to protect the shills, but it'll be too late."

Fucking hell. "Is that enough to get him in front of a vampire judge for a truth scan?" I mutter to Alistair, and he nods grimly.

Even as Steffen starts to speak again, I reach out with my magic. We're old enough and have known each other long enough—and intimately enough—to be able to speak telepathically over short distances even in biped form, which not all dragons can do. *"That's enough for a warrant, Stef."*

He doesn't falter. "...plan is to murder as many members of the community as you know of and wait for the rest to reveal themselves?"

"They'll have to come out. With the shills gone, there's nobody to lure people to them to eat." Chet seems disturbingly excited by this.

"And we have the numbers? There might not be as many community members as humans, but they do have some specialized abilities."

Chet seems to falter, as though he hadn't considered the fact that his stepfamily has superior strength, speed, and senses, plus the ability to turn into freaking huge canines with razor-sharp teeth and claws. He might succeed in taking them down with the element of surprise, but even then, it wouldn't be easy.

"The others say we do," he says. "There's hundreds of us, and we have right on our side."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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Steffen

THEY HAVE *RIGHT* on their side? This kid needs to be sent to his room to think about what he's done.

“That's good to know,” I say instead of demanding he tell me what he's been smoking. It makes me sad, what's happened to this kid. He's obviously not too intelligent, very naïve, filled with anger and resentment against the wrong people, and willing to cling to whatever ridiculous notion he's fed as long as it panders to his prejudices. Even my paranoia could see the truck-sized holes in this conspiracy.

That's not to say it's impossible. But I've already considered the likelihood of renegade militia groups using underground tunnels to form a society with the intent of eventually rising up and slaughtering and enslaving the rest of us. It's feasible enough that I did some investigating, both magical and mundane. No such tunnels exist, and while there are many unhinged militia organizations planning to one day overthrow governments, none of them—or even all of them put together—would pose a substantial threat to the human military. The greatest threat to the community—and to humanity—is still humanity itself.

And this foolish child is proof of that. He hasn't even asked to see proof of the conspiracy he's bought into so wholeheartedly that he plans to take part in wholesale slaughter.

Not that it would get that far. A few hundred humans, even skilled and armed—which these don't appear to be—might succeed in getting the jump on *some* civilians, but the tide

would quickly turn, and when CSG's Enforcement joined the fracas, it would be quelled. The emotional devastation for the survivors, though, knowing their own family members had turned against them... that would linger.

I tap my finger subtly, letting Aroha know I'm going to wrap this up. There's every chance Chet won't react well to what I say next, so she needs to be ready. I'm not sure exactly how many people are on the other side of the door listening to us. I know Wil would come to aid us if necessary, but the most dangerous moment will be the first one.

"The thing is, Chet, you clearly believe that 'right' is the violent murder of innocent people, and you're unable to offer any kind of proof of any of this. So we're going to need to look into it some more."

He frowns, looking uncertainly from me to Aroha. "What do you mean? You can't be siding with them. Man, listen, they're just using you. When you're no good to them anymore, they'll feed you to their young like they do other humans!"

I push back my chair and stand, Aroha doing the same at my side. Chet scrambles to his feet too, glancing at the door, and I direct my magic to form an invisible cage around him. It's easier than trying to catch him after he starts running.

Trying to keep my voice gentle—he's so young, after all—I say, "I'm not human, Chet," and drop my glamor.

Horror blooms on his face when he sees my true features. We don't look that different from Earth species—the general shape of the face is the same, and we have the same eyes-nose-lips combo, but the bone structure of our upper face is obviously different. There's no way to mistake us for human, even without the pointy ears they obsess over.

He makes a break for the door, and Aroha teleports to put herself in front of it, but he only makes it two steps before bouncing harmlessly off my magic. Gasping, he pats the air around him, feeling the outline of the cage. "Y-You... you... what *are* you?"

I snort. Like I'm telling him that. If he doesn't already know enough to make a guess, I'm not going to give him the information. As long as he's alive, he poses a threat to us, and despite what people like to think of me, I don't think we should kill all the humans.

Well... not really.

"Let me tell you what's going to happen now," I say instead, keeping my calm voice. "Enforcement is going to take you to a holding cell." He pales, probably at the idea of being in a community prison with community members, so I add, "You'll be in isolation, so nobody will bother you. We're going to send the video footage and transcript of this interview to a judge with an emergency request for a hearing. The judge will review it this afternoon, and I fully expect that the hearing will take place either this evening or tomorrow morning at the latest." I don't tell him what it will entail. The judge will do that, and there's no point in making him agonize over it between now and then. Having your thoughts and memories searched isn't nice, even though it's painless. It's still a violation, and it's only knowing that many lives are at risk if we don't know everything that leads me to make the request. Or let Aroha do it, anyway. I technically don't have jurisdiction.

His face darkens. "This is bullshit! They're going to kill me for being human!"

"Nobody's going to kill you," Aroha says, sighing as she turns to open the door. She blinks at the size of the crowd outside. "Has someone called Enforcement?" she asks, and there's a murmur of yeses. "Great. Thanks."

"Chet, you're legally an adult, but do you want us to call your mother?" I won't deprive him of that comfort if he needs it. Though I'm sure she'll be devastated when she hears what he's planning.

He sneers and says nothing, so I shrug and turn to Aroha. "Do you have this from here?" I ask her, and she nods.

"I'll send the request to you to read before I submit it. Give me an hour or so. Uh... is Enforcement going to be able to

take him?” She gestures to where Chet is pushing with all his might against the cage of magic.

Before I can answer, two Enforcement officers and Kirsch, the head of CSG Security, push through the nosy crowd outside and join us. The small meeting room is definitely crowded now. I release Chet into the custody of the hulking demon enforcers and back out of the room.

The crowd is dispersing, but Wil’s waiting for me. Beside him is Alistair, and I brace myself. One never knows what’s going to come out of Alistair’s mouth.

“You are the fucking master.”

Like that.

“Thank you?” I meet Wil’s gaze, assuring myself everything is okay, and then the three of us turn in the direction of our office.

“You had that kid eating out of your hand,” Alistair enthuses. “And you didn’t have to raise your voice even once! Just saying, dude, you’re welcome to conduct interrogations for me anytime.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ll pass. This is a disaster, though.” My paranoia is still thankfully passive, what with the pending threat of a mob of humans planning a murderous rampage. Who needs a conspiracy theory when there’s an actual threat?

“I’ve already sent David a message,” Alistair acknowledges. “Is Aroha going to submit the judicial request, or do you want us to handle that?”

“She’ll do it. She said she’d send it to me first, and I’ll make sure you all get a copy. What are the chances of... it happening tonight?” Even thinking about a vampire judge searching Chet’s mind makes me uncomfortable. My mind is the only place I feel close to safe. Having that boundary breached... it’s disgusting.

“Not high,” he admits. “Once the judge reviews the request and supporting evidence, they’ll ask for proof that he was advised of what the next steps are and given the chance to tell

us everything of his own will. At that point, a lot of people start talking. Everything they say needs to be checked out and either verified or shown to be a lie.”

I stop in front of the office and unlock the door. “Who handles that? We don’t want word of this getting out.”

Alistair shakes his head, crossing the room to make himself comfortable in Wil’s desk chair. Wil follows and dumps him out of it.

“Hey!” Huddled in a pile of limbs on the floor, the big hellhound glares at my boyfriend while I grin.

“Sit in the visitor chair,” Wil says heartlessly, planting his ass in the seat and nudging Alistair with his foot.

“But it’s not as comfortable,” Alistair whines. He pouts for a second, then picks himself up off the floor and glances at my chair.

“Not if you want to keep living,” I warn him, strolling across the room and seating myself.

He heaves a huge sigh. “Fiiiiiiiine. I have to go back to my office and fill the others in, anyway. But to answer your question, any situation that arises as the result of a CSG operation—or a combined CSG-DEA operation like this one—is managed only by us. Usually it would be Enforcement, but in this case, the judge’s request for more evidence will go to Aroha and whoever she cc’s on the initial request. Which should be you... and probably David and Caolan, since they’re in charge of Operation: Survival.”

Wil groans. “That name sucks so hard.”

Alistair looks like he’s going to argue, so I interrupt. “And then we’re responsible for questioning Chet and verifying anything he tells us?”

“Yes.” Alistair nods. “I don’t think David would have any problem with you doing the questioning, though we usually send Gideon. His resting bitch face is pretty much all it takes for people to shit their pants.”

That must be wonderful. I tried to cultivate a resting bitch face, but after so many years of paranoia, it seems my default is suspicious.

“And then it’d be all hands on deck to verify,” he adds. “If the kid decides to talk, none of us will be sleeping tonight.”

“Yay,” Wil says with a sigh.

“You will be,” I tell him. “Someone needs to stay close to Brandt.” I know he’ll be behind wards, but my paranoia will kick in if one of us isn’t in the condo building while he’s there. Especially knowing there’s a credible threat.

“What I want to know,” Alistair continues as though neither of us spoke, “is are these the people who tried to hack Wil’s phone?”

We all fall silent while we consider that.

“It’s hard to say without knowing more,” Wil ventures. “It seems wrong, somehow? They have the knowledge and ability to get into our secure offices and attempt a hack on my phone without being noticed or identified, but their plan of attack is so... stupid? I honestly struggle to see how they got hundreds of people to believe them.”

I don’t—hate is a powerful blinder.

“But,” he concedes, “the idea of there being two separate secret plots is unlikely.” He glances at me. “Isn’t it?”

My brain has already considered this. “Coincidental, but not impossible. We need more information before we can be sure.”

Alistair turns for the door. “I guess that’s my cue to get to work.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Wil

DESPITE ALISTAIR'S prediction and Stef's careful planning, when bedtime rolls around, we're getting between the sheets together. Me and Steffen, that is. Not Alistair. Shudder. Imagine how loud and demanding he'd be in bed, even without sex.

As expected, the judge came back with the interview request, and Stef decided to let Gideon do it. That was the right call—we watched through one-way glass as the kid took one look at Gideon's size, horns, and glower, squeaked, and began stammering.

He still had enough of his wits to give us obviously fake information, and by that, I mean it was so obviously fake that it only took two people an hour to prove that. Even if some of the other stuff he said was true, the fact that he lied about any of it means the judge will see him tomorrow morning.

I hold back a shudder. There's nothing good about someone's thoughts and memories being forcibly read.

But I'm glad we're both home.

Stef settles back against his pillow with a sigh.

"How's it feel to be validated?" I ask him, and a tiny smile curls his lips.

"The best part was when Alistair loudly announced that it was a good thing I'd anticipated humans plotting to destroy us, or they might have succeeded," he admits. "And then everyone went quiet except for that one hellhound who said, 'Wait, you mean he's not a crackpot?'"

I frown at the memory. I hate when people say that shit about Stef. But it was followed up by raucous outpouring of things like “he’s *our* crackpot!” and “even cracked pots are right twice a day.” Which then required a ten-minute explanation about how that should have been “stopped clocks” and didn’t apply in this situation anyway. Regardless, it ended with everyone being glad Stef’s around, and that’s all that matters to me.

“Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day,” he warns, staring up at the ceiling. “And the rest of the week. Probably next week too.”

“Thwarting a plot to commit genocide has a way of messing up the schedule,” I agree, wondering where he’s going with this.

He shrugs. “I’m just saying... we should probably get a good night’s sleep.”

I grin in sudden realization. The reluctance in his voice says more clearly than anything else could that sleep is not what he wants right now.

“Sure, if that’s what you want.” I wait for his mouth to turn down at the corners before adding, “Unless I can interest you in a hero’s blowjob?”

He must hear the laughter I’m trying to hide, because his gaze flashes to me. “I wouldn’t want you to feel obligated.”

I let my laughter free and toss back the covers. “Believe me, you’d be doing me a favor.” I skim my gaze down his naked body to his very interested cock. “Oh look, it’s an old friend of mine.”

“Old?” he protests, but he’s smiling.

“Longtime?” I suggest, trailing my fingertips down the path my eyes took a moment ago. He shivers under my touch.

“Better,” he concedes, his voice going a little hoarse as my fingers slide along the crease of his thigh and reach his balls. Since he’s a dragon, they’re nonfunctional, but still sensitive to touch—and I plan to do a whole lot of touching.

Giving in to the mute plea in his expression, I lower my head... and skim my lips down the side of his dick. He breathes out shakily, then whines when I move on to his balls. First a few gentle, almost chaste kisses... a lick or two... and then I take first one, then the other into my mouth. He likes this, but what he really loves is when I blow on the wet flesh after.

The long groan I draw from him is all the proof I need that I'm on the right track.

I torture him like that, occasionally giving his cock a nudge or a light lick, until his hands are clenched in the sheets and he's whining incoherently. Then I sit up.

His eyes flutter open, hazy and dazed.

"How's my hero doing?" I ask cheerfully, then run my tongue over my wet and puffy lips.

"Wil..." he pleads.

"Don't worry, I gotcha," I assure him, then bend to my task once more.

This time, I get straight to business, taking his dick into my mouth and closing my lips tightly around the head. Then I slide down, letting him feel as each milimeter is encased in the wet heat. I love this—love the way my hold has to expand and tighten as I slide over each ridge until finally, I've taken him as far as I can.

I hold there for a moment, sucking gently, and wrap my hand around the base of him. Then I slowly pull off, doing the whole thing in reverse.

And repeat.

And again.

He can only take this for so long before he—

Right on cue, his hands fist in my hair and he urges me to speed up. I lift my gaze, looking up the long line of his torso to where he's raised his head and is staring back at me.

Okay.

Shifting position so I'm straddling his thick thigh, I set about sucking him off in earnest. He responds by rocking his leg to the rhythm I set, giving me the friction I need to come with him.

Faster now, I work his dick, sliding my hand down to play with his balls, and as the muscles in his thigh quiver and tighten, I ease back a little and put all my effort into sucking his cockhead—

“Uggghhhh!” he shouts. “Wil!” His whole body goes rigid, and I give fleeting thanks for the auditory shield on the apartment before I let myself go over the edge.

Because Stef's pleasure is all it takes for me to come.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Steffen

WE'VE TAKEN over the main conference room at CSG, which has the most space, and as information trickles in, we're adding it to the huge maps and charts spread across the big table. The credenza along the wall holds an array of snacks, and the room is so heavily warded that we're alerted if anyone so much as walks down the hall outside. We've been at this for seven hours, and things are finally starting to take shape.

The shape they're taking is one that I've been warning everyone about for years. It's the oddest feeling, this sensation of being completely vindicated. All those times people said I was a wacky conspiracy theorist, that my paranoia made me a liability... they may have been partly right, but that doesn't mean I was wrong. Proof of that is the actual conspiracy we're uncovering now: small groups of dissatisfied renegade humans plotting widespread murder of their supposed loved ones. And what makes it more interesting is that while the humans think this will lure out "the big shot" members of the community from the tunnels they're hiding in, we know those tunnels don't exist. So... whoever planned this whole conspiracy has another end game in mind, and we don't know what it is or who they are.

What we're rapidly learning are the details of the planned attack. We know that the humans involved are all attached in some way to community members. Two of the names that have come up so far were on the list my team cleared to begin learning about magic soon. Needless to say, the words I had with my team were succinct and not really appropriate for an office environment. I don't think anyone will report me to HR,

though, what with their sloppiness having nearly given humans who want to kill us all the knowledge of how to use magic.

“How are the leaders managing to stay so completely hidden?” Gideon growls, staring at the map tagged with the home addresses of the humans who’d planned to participate in wholesale slaughter next month.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Wil agrees. He’s also staring at the map, but I can see his magic working, trying to find patterns in the seemingly random pins scattered across it. Trying to find something, *anything* that might give us an idea who’s behind all this and why.

What are they trying to do? There’s a lot of work involved for an “uprising” that will result in the deaths of some civilians, but that’s pretty much it. Are they hoping that we won’t be able to contain the news of the coordinated, violent attacks? That it will attract the attention of the human media and expose the community to humans? If that’s the case, *who are they?* Humans? And this was the best way they could think of to expose us? Murdering innocent civilians doesn’t paint them in a good light.

More frightening would be if it was another community cult like the CCA. Not that long ago, the CCA, headed by Dr. Francis Tish, allied with Éibhear and nearly destroyed everything. If the people behind this are part of the community, that means we’ve somehow overlooked an embedded cult with resources and long-reaching plans... though what those plans are, I have no idea.

“Someone has to know who they are,” Andrew says. He’s slumped in a chair, feet propped in another, head lolling back, eyes closed. I thought he was asleep.

Elinor starts. “You’re awake!”

One eye slits open. “Of course I’m awake. I’m thinking.”

“Funny how you thinking looks a lot like you sleeping,” Alistair muses. Andrew flips him off and closes his eye again.

“Someone has to know who they are,” Wil agrees, picking up the thread of conversation. “Who, though? So far, all the people we’ve identified are barely grunt-level. They know nothing about anything except for what they hear in that online forum.”

“Organization does seem slipshod.” Alistair comes to the table and stares at the map as well. “If we’re dealing with a group, it’s almost as though they’re using these humans and keeping themselves clear.”

“Testing the waters to see how we respond?” Gideon asks. “That’s possible. In the meantime, they’re keeping their own people away from it all, ready for their real strike.”

“Great,” Andrew mutters. “Now we not only have to work out who these people are and what their aim is, we also have to figure out what their real strike will be.”

My paranoia kicks up a little, not liking the sound of that and wanting to spend a few hours working out the many awful possibilities. I try out Wil’s theory about thanking it. *Thank you for helping us discover this. We’ll take it from here.*

The frantic landslide of catastrophes slows to a trickle, making it much easier to push those thoughts aside. This might actually work?

I turn my attention back to the conversation. “We don’t need to figure out all three at once,” I remind Andrew. “If we can discover one, the other two will likely fall into place.”

“So... who, why, or what.” Gideon cracks his neck. “We might not know exactly why, but we can assume it’s to expose or otherwise harm the community.”

“Can we?” Elinor counters. “What if they want to run the community, rather than harm it? That was basically Tish’s goal... after he got done enslaving humanity.”

“Are you suggesting this group, whoever they are, has the knowledge and ability to corporealize and kill the magic?” Alistair counters, and the tension level in the room rises. We all lived through Éibhear and Tish’s horrific—and nearly

successful—plan, and we really didn't think it could possibly happen again.

“No,” Elinor concedes, but there's a note of doubt in her voice that has me mentally reviewing what would be required to make it happen. The spell, the seal, a willing witness of each species, sealed with the flame of a dragon...

“Where are the spell and the seal?” Gideon asks, thinking along the same lines as me.

“Only six people know, and I'm not one of them, thank fuck,” Alistair replies.

I am. Brandt, the king, and Lucifer Sam all know, and they each chose one other person to also know. The protections are such that four of us are needed to gain access. Frankly, I wanted both the spell and seal destroyed, but the magic insisted they not be. I keep my mouth shut now—it's not a stretch to guess that Brandt picked me to tell, but if they don't know, I'm not going to share. The fewer people who can identify the key holders, the better.

“They're as safe as they can get,” Andrew insists, opening his eyes and sitting up. “Plus, we kept the exact details quiet, so if that's what's happening, our biggest problem is that the leader is someone who's privy to every top-level security measure we have. They're either in this room now or have access to be here.”

Not likely not likely not likely, I mentally chant, trying to head off my paranoia. Because he's right, this is a thought I've already had, and it would be so, so easy to get caught in a spiral of suspicion. But the only chance we have of moving forward and resolving this is to trust each other.

Unless, of course, one of us *is* the villain, in which case we won't ever resolve this and we'll probably die.

On the other hand, if one of us is the villain, they've been careful not to use any of the top-level data they have access to. They would know a lot of stuff that could easily and quickly destroy us all—far more easily than inciting a bunch of

dissatisfied humans to commit murder. That they opted to go that route instead implies that it's *not* one of us.

Unless it *is* one of us, but for reasons unknown they want this to be a drawn-out, painful war of attrition while they remain in the background, pulling strings to make the world fall apart.

I cut myself off before I get any further into the spiral and look up to see all eyes on me.

“You’ve already thought of that?” Alistair asks.

“How likely is it?” Elinor adds. From the corner of my eye, I see Wil wince, probably worried that the question will start me catastrophizing.

I shrug, surprised by how calm I feel. “Depending on the exact scenario, it’s just as likely as none of us being the leader.”

The silence that follows is awkward. I’m sure they were hoping I’d tell them it was unlikely, but that’s just not my thing. Everyone avoids looking at each other, probably so they don’t get accused of being the secret villain.

“Stef,” Wil murmurs. “That’s not helping.” There’s a tiny edge of amusement in his voice. He knows that if I seriously considered us to be at risk here, if I seriously considered one of them to be the one behind all this, I’d have made arrangements to protect us... and probably not said anything out loud.

Although, if the villain is in this room, they know I’m a paranoid conspiracy theorist and that I’d likely suspect they would be in this room. So what better way to convince them that I think that’s not the case than to speak casually of it?

“Whether it’s one of us or not, there are only two paths open to us. We keep working to find the answers or we don’t. If we do, either we’ll succeed or we won’t, but at least we’ll have tried. If we don’t—”

“We have to live with the fact that we didn’t even try,” Alistair finishes. “Fuck that. Hellhounds do not give up

without trying. If we did, our ancestors never would have discovered which mushrooms are safe to eat.”

I frown and look at Wil. Does he mean...?

“I’m scared to ask,” Wil says.

“You should be,” Gideon says. “Anyone with a brain is scared to ask what the fuck the hellhounds are doing.” The words are harsh, but the sideways glance he gives Alistair is brimming with amusement... and maybe affection. There’s no chance any of them believe any of their friends are involved in this. I know Wil and I aren’t. So either the elves with clearance are, or none of us are.

Either way, the people in this room right now aren’t.

Or I’m completely wrong and they are.

“So we keep working,” Andrew declares.

“We keep working,” Wil agrees.

The tension in the room dissipates a little. “I’m going to the bathroom,” Andrew announces. “And I’m stopping at the vending machine on the way back. We’re out of blood chocolate. Anyone want anything?”

I drift away from the table toward the window and look out over the city. These windows are specially treated to prevent anyone outside from being able to see in, and that’s even before the wards were put up. The energy from those wards buzzes lightly against my skin as I stare into the distance, wondering where our bad guy is.

Alistair sidles up beside me. “Heyyyyyy...”

I flick him a glance. He and Wil are quite good friends and occasionally go out for drinks or paintball, but I’ve never found it easy to connect with very exuberant people. We’ve talked a few times over the years... or he’s talked at me and I’ve listened.

He doesn’t wait for me to reply. “I don’t know if you remember the time I was playing with a mechanical puzzle my friend sent me and you asked where I got it?”

I turn to him, interest piqued. I do remember—the puzzle looked particularly intricate, and I wanted to get one for Wil’s hoard. But he said his friend made them to order and had a waitlist two years long. I got on the waitlist, but I’m still waiting.

“Well, one of his customers filed a chargeback, only the idiot did it before the puzzle was shipped.”

“What’s a chargeback?” I ask. I’m not sure where this story is going, but I need all the details to be able to understand it.

“It’s when someone pays for something with a credit card, then calls the card company and disputes the transaction so they can get their money back.”

“But they still want the thing they bought? That’s stealing.” Outrage fills me.

Alistair nods. “Yep. People suck. Anyway, Cam hadn’t shipped the puzzle yet, and since he only does custom orders, he’s not really set up to sell one that’s ready-made. So I bought it from him. Here.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cotton pouch with a solid object inside, then hands it to me. It’s about as thick as my thumb and half the size of my palm.

“What...?” Is he giving it to me?

“Consider it a thanks for uncovering this whole conspiracy. You saved a lot of lives with your insistence that we vet human relatives before letting them have magic. Your paranoia saved the day.”

“Thank you,” I manage. My brain is completely blank. I’ve been given gifts before, of course... by Wil, mostly. Brandt and the others at Here Be Dragons too. But never by anyone else. And never because I was paranoid. “Please let me pay you for it.”

He holds up both hands, palms out. “Nope. No way. It’s a present.” His eyes narrow when I open my mouth to argue. “If you offer to pay again, I’m going to be *very* offended. An offended hellhound is not a good thing.”

Since hellhounds are hard to take when they're in a good mood, I'm hesitant to incur the wrath of an offended one. I wanted to pay because this is a gift for Wil, but I guess my paranoia earned it? And since Wil has done so much to help me manage my paranoia over the years, it's somewhat fitting that it should earn a gift for him.

"Thank you," I say again. "I appreciate this."

He grins. "You haven't even looked at it yet."

I slide it into my pocket. "I don't need to. It's still a gift I treasure."

As if I've announced that he won a prize, his face lights up. "Yesssss! Stef, my man, you are totally my people! We should go for drinks or something. You haven't partied till you've partied with a hellhound."

No.

Just... no.

"I don't party."

His pout is oddly fascinating. Dustin pouts all the time, but it suits his adorable face and demeanor. Alistair is a six-foot-five tank of a man... the pout looks incongruous on his face.

Yet, part of me wants to give in and agree to his demands.

"You hellhounds are very dangerous."

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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Wil

I KEEP HALF an eye on Steffen and Alistair. Al's shown he respects Stef, but there's still a chance he's going to say something stupid. I don't know what he gave him, but Stef seemed surprised at first, then... pleased?

Since this conspiracy was uncovered, he's gone from strength to strength. He told me once that when there's an immediate crisis at hand, his paranoia goes into hibernation, allowing him to deal with it, but it's been a week, and while we're working to avoid future crises, we're not in the middle of one right now. This is a definite improvement for him. I was expecting the whole "it could be one of us" thing to send him into a major spiral, even though I'm sure he'd already thought of it, but he not only avoided that, he also prevented everyone else from freaking out.

I love that people are getting to see the Steffen I see. And whatever he and Alistair are talking about, I hope it leads to more friendships for him.

My phone chimes in my pocket, and I pull it out to see a message from Enderl, requesting Stef's and my presence for a "non-urgent but annoying matter." His words. I glance over at Stef, who's looking at his phone too—presumably at the same message. He says something to Alistair and then heads in my direction.

"Let's go. This is a good time."

Signaling to the others that we'll be back, I follow him out through the wards. I'm not sure I'll ever get used to the

sensation of combined elf-dragon-sorcerer wards. They're the strongest it's possible to create—that we know of—but the addition of pure sorcery makes them feel alien somehow.

Enderl's been doing paperwork in our office for half the day, and that's where we find him.

“...can promise you, there's no way he'll agree to this,” he's saying. It sounds like he's trying not to laugh. “But he'll be here soon and you can ask him yourself. Do you mind if I record it?”

Uh-oh. That doesn't sound promising.

Steffen crosses the threshold two steps ahead of me. “Is there a problem?”

I pause in the doorway and take in the room. Enderl is lounging back in my desk chair. He looks like he's two seconds away from putting his feet on my desk. Standing on the other side of the desk, looming like a supervillain, is one of Kirsch's CSG security people. I don't actually know his name.

“No problem,” he huffs. “We're trying to improve security screening to prevent another incident, and your man here is being difficult.”

Enderl smiles widely. I know that smile. It means nothing good. “Tell them your plan,” he urges.

The guy turns to us and explains, “It's really simple. We want to put up screening wards at the entrances to the building that will alert us when any nonhuman who doesn't work here enters. That way, we'll have time to assess if they're a threat before they make it up the elevators to our floors.”

That's actually not such a terrible idea. I slide my gaze over to Enderl, who's grinning like a loon. There has to be more to it.

“I assume you have a way to account for visitors?” Stef's asking.

The guy—I wish I remembered his name—nods. “Most of the visitors here have appointments anyway. We'll ask that staff note those appointments in a register so we can check any

unknowns against it. And,” he continues enthusiastically, “since we almost never get human visitors here, that means we can safely assume that any unrecognized human in the offices is a threat.”

That sounds a little less sensible, and I can tell Steffen’s thinking the same thing. His expression doesn’t change, though. “How will these screening wards work? I’ve never heard of something like this.”

Although all wards are by nature “screening” wards, coded to allow specific people entry or to check for the intention of the entrant, the more people who pass through a ward, the less complex it can be without causing problems. This is a huge building with thousands of people working here, not to mention all the visitors—there’s a recruitment agency on the third floor and two law firms. Coding a ward to screen all those people, recognize about a thousand individuals of varying species, allow humans through without issue, but alert for anyone else that’s unrecognized... well, I wouldn’t even know where to start.

“It’s coded to individual DNA,” he starts.

“No,” Steffen says.

Enderl laughs.

The guy blinks. “What do you mean, no? You haven’t heard how it works yet!”

Stef walks past him to his desk and wakes his computer. “Does it require you to have a DNA sample from every person who works here on file for the ward to index against?” He types in his password.

“Yes,” the guy agrees. “And then—”

“No.”

I prop myself against my desk to enjoy the show. Enderl was right—we should have recorded this.

“But you haven’t heard it all!” the guy shouts in exasperation.

Stef finishes checking his email or whatever and locks his computer again, then looks up. “I don’t need to hear more. There’s no way I’m ever going to allow anyone to take DNA from a dragon. Not ever. And if by some freak chance that DNA gets taken, you will have to murder me a dozen times to keep me from getting it back. There is no chance, none at all, that I will let you keep a register of dragon DNA.”

“But—”

“No.”

The guy glares. “You were nicer the last time I talked to you.” He spins on his heel and storms out. Steffen stares after him.

Enderl stretches and sits up straight. “Well, that was delightful. I’m so glad I asked you to come instead of telling him to come back.”

“I’ll have a word with Kirsch. This isn’t the kind of thing I expected him to approve. I doubt anyone at CSG will go for it, either.” Especially after Dr. Tish’s gene experimentation. I glance over at Stef, who’s still frowning at the door. “Something wrong, Stef?”

He shakes his head. “Aside from how big an idiot that guy is? I’m trying to remember what I could have said or done to make him think I was nice.”



I SCRAPE up the last of my pasta and sigh. It’s been such a long day, and there’s so much going on right now... all I want is to snuggle on the couch with Stef and switch my brain off. But we both brought work home, and even if I decided to blow it off, my conscience would bug me. Until we figure out who’s behind all this and what they really want, my mind won’t rest.

Definitely Steffen’s won’t.

“I have a surprise for you,” he says out of nowhere, drawing my gaze to him.

“You do?”

He nods smugly and pulls something out of his pocket. “Here.”

I take the surprisingly heavy pouch and immediately know what it is. “For my hoard?” As always when he does this, I get warm inside. Ever since I showed him my hoard that first time, back when he was still trying to discover what he wanted to hoard for himself, he’s been searching out mechanical puzzles for me to add to it. He’s picky about it, too—where I’ll happily hoard any I come across, even if I solve them easily, he’ll only give me ones that are tricky and very well made.

“For your hoard.”

I open the pouch and slide out the puzzle. It’s a void lock, and the cool metal warms to my touch. There’s a small slip of paper in with it that tells me five hundred moves are needed to unlock it. The craftsmanship is exquisite, and I’m going to have hours of fun with this.

“Thank you.” I lean over and kiss him. “This is perfect.”

“Go and get started with it,” he orders. “I’ll do the washing up.”

I should say no, we’ll clean up together, but... “Just for a little while. Where’d you get this? And when did you even have time?”

He stands and starts clearing our plates. “Alistair has a friend who makes them. I’m on his waitlist, but one of his customers didn’t want to pay for this one, so he sent it.”

Maybe it’s not going to take as much effort as I thought to expand Stef’s social circle. I didn’t even know Alistair had a puzzle-making friend. “Look at you, making friends and contacts,” I tease. My fingers are already probing the puzzle, working out which of the bolts is the first move.

“Does anyone have a choice about being friends with Alistair? My paranoia is convinced he’s on a mission to take over the world by squirming into everyone’s life. Then when he declares himself supreme overlord or whatever, everyone

will be so relieved he's found a hobby that they'll go along with it."

I laugh. "What's the actual likelihood of that being true?"

Steffen smirks. "Higher than most people would think."

Putting the puzzle down, I slide off my stool and go around the counter to hug him and lay a kiss on his cheek. "You're so amazing."

He turns his head to kiss me, and for long moments, we forget the dishes, my puzzle, and everything outside the condo. There's just us and kisses so familiar, I could set music to them.

Then he pulls back. "Don't distract me. I need to work tonight, even if I'd rather be working you over."

With a sigh and a last kiss, I go back to my stool. "I know we're lucky to have discovered this plot the way we did, but would it be too much to ask to only have one problem at a time to deal with? Couldn't we have saved the other species from slowly becoming extinct first, then worried about this hidden villain who thinks it's okay to murder people?"

"That would have been nice," he agrees, opening the dishwasher. "As long as I have you, though, I can handle the rest." He frowns. "I do wish I could work out who this damn hidden villain is."

I pick up the puzzle again and let my fingers play over the bolts. Like it always does, my mind begins to clear. "Any theories?"

"Lots." There's a grim note to his reply. "So many, it almost takes me back to my lock-everyone-safely-up-at-Here-Be-Dragons phase. I'm almost positive it's nobody with top-level clearance, though. It still *could* be, but the chances are slim. There are too many variables that would need to be just so." He stops stacking the dishwasher and stares into the distance.

"If chances are that slim, we need to assume it's not the case and push forward," I say hastily, not wanting his paranoia to gain a foothold right now.

“You’re right. If it is one of them, we’re screwed anyway. They already have access to whatever information they need to end us all. Knowing how we plan to deal with the villain we haven’t even identified yet really wouldn’t weight the scales any further in their favor.” He turns on the tap as though he hasn’t proclaimed our potential doom. Lucky for me, I’m used to it.

“Even with them ruled out, I’m guessing there are more options than we can easily investigate?”

He nods. “And that’s just the ones we already have identities for. It could legitimately be someone whose grudge or motive hasn’t been identified yet... someone random, hidden among the population. Without more information, we have no chance of ferreting them out.”

I study the puzzle in my hand, feeling the click as I slide the next bolt in the sequence. Why can’t all the puzzles in my life right now be logical like this one?

“We’ll just have to keep searching, then. Eventually, we’ll find the right piece of information.”

Let’s just hope it’s in time.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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Wil

I GLANCE up from my screen as the door opens, not pausing my typing, then back at the document at the sight of the familiar face. “Hey, Stef—”

I look at him again. “Oh shit, I forgot your coffee,” I say to cover the very obvious way I cut myself off. Because that’s not Steffen.

Grabbing my take-out cup, I half extend it in the stranger’s direction, my heart pounding so hard, I’m terrified he can hear it. “Do you want mine instead?”

He shakes his head—the head that’s identical to Steffen’s in every way—and mutters, “No.”

“Okay. I’m going downstairs in a bit and can get you one then.” I use the cover of putting my cup down to sweep my phone into my lap while the imposter goes to Steffen’s desk and makes himself at home in the chair. He’s not going to achieve much—Stef’s desk is impeccably tidy, as always, with nothing on the surface except the computer. Which is locked. My guess is that he’s going to try to crack the password. Why else would he be here?

I pretend to be fascinated by what’s on my screen while switching my phone to silent mode and one-handedly texting for help. Stef first, because whoever this person is, if he’s hurt Steffen, he’s not going to live long enough to regret it.

Wil: URGENT. Where are you?

I peek through my lashes at the imposter as the message sends. He gives no sign that his phone has dinged or vibrated,

and I hear nothing. Hopefully that means he doesn't have Stef's phone. I send another two messages while waiting for a response, one to our security team chat, and one to the combined CSG-DEA security management chat. They both say the same thing.

Wil: Intruder my office. Discretion essential.

A new message flashes up on my screen.

Steffen: Brandt's office. What's wrong?

Steffen: INTRUDER?

He's seen the group messages too, then. I hope with every fiber of my being that it's actually Steffen and not an accomplice of the imposter.

Who's been typing on Stef's keyboard, attempting to get in, for the last couple minutes. He hasn't succeeded yet; I can tell by the light reflecting off his face. He seems to know what he's doing, though—he's not just pecking at the keys and guessing at passwords. That's serious typing. We have some pretty good security to prevent this kind of hacking, but nothing's perfect, and I don't know how long it can keep him out... or what he'll do if he can't get around it.

The security group chat pops up with a thumbs-up emoji from Enderl, which means the team is on the way. The CSG-DEA chat pops up next.

Kirsch: OMW. Are you safe?

Noah: We're coming

There's also a thumbs-up from Eoin. So unless this guy brought a big team with him, this is going to be fine. And if that was the case, someone would have noticed by now, right?

Confident that backup's on the way, I slip my phone into my pocket, lock my screen, and lash out hard with my magic. He's taken completely by surprise, which is a nice compliment to my acting skills, and has no time to react before I have him locked down—magically frozen in place, with his own magic locked into a cage.

Though I nearly fumble it all when his appearance stays the same. What the fuck? With his magic restricted that severely, whatever glamor he's wearing to look like Stef should have failed. But then... it should never have worked in here to begin with. Steffen's got some heavy-duty spells and wards on this room. Even if this imposter is strong enough in his magic to maintain a glamor despite them, there should have been a sign of it. A shimmer, a halo... something. Steffen's exceptional at this kind of defensive magic, and he had Brandt assist him with these wards. This room and Brandt's office should be able to withstand pretty much anything.

But the imposter's glamor remains solid and unblemished.

The door opens, and Enderl strolls "casually" in, his gaze skimming the room. When he sees nobody but me and Stef, confusion crosses his expression.

"Drill? Or false alarm?" he asks "Steffen," then blinks as he sees the intricate cage of my magic. "Wil, what—"

More people enter the room, and there's a flurry of surprised exclamations. Because one of them is Steffen.

Enderl slowly looks from the man in the chair to the one standing beside him. "What the fuck?" he breathes. He knows about the wards on this room. He knows what should be impossible.

"Wil, are you okay?" the real Steffen asks, his magic reaching out to mine as it always does.

"Yes. Are you? I was half expecting..." I trail off. It's not hard to guess what I was expecting.

"Why is there two of them?" one of the security guys with Kirsch asks warily. "And which is the real one?"

I point to Steffen. "That one. I don't know who the other is."

"Are you sure?" Gideon demands, pushing forward and studying both of them with scary intensity. "I can't see any difference."

“Neither can I.” Unlike everyone else, Alistair seems delighted by this. He and Andrew move toward the fake Steffen, their faces alight with curiosity.

“Stop right there,” I order. Half my attention is still on Steffen. I’m worried this is going to kick his paranoia into high gear, but the touch of his magic against mine feels only shocked and curious... with a good dose of concern that someone has pulled this off. “Where’s Brandt? We might need him here. I can’t see a crack in this glamor at all.”

“He’s in the hallway. I didn’t want him in here until I knew what was happening.” Steffen’s unblinking gaze is on the imposter, who hasn’t said a single word since I locked him down. His face right now as he glares back at Steffen sends chills down my spine.

“Maybe you should wait out there with him,” I suggest uneasily. The hatred the imposter is aiming at Steffen is extreme. He didn’t even look at me that way when I attacked him and foiled his plans.

Something’s not right here.

I’m not the only one who thinks so. Gideon moves so he’s blocking the door, and Alistair and Andrew rejoin him. “You’re sure about which is which?”

“One hundred percent. I knew he wasn’t Steffen the second I saw him.” I tip my head toward the stranger.

“I don’t question you,” Enderl says hesitantly, his gaze flicking between them, “but how? The glamor is... perfect.”

What he means by that is that he can’t tell any difference between them. My blood turns to ice as the implications sink in. If I’m the only one who can see through the imposter... how much damage could he have done?

My gaze shoots to Steffen’s, and I see the same knowledge there. How long has this guy been wandering around wearing Stef’s face? Steffen has top-level security access. He can go anywhere in this building, gain access to any office, almost any file. The imposter won’t know the access codes, but how often do we hold doors for colleagues we know? We’re not

supposed to—and Steffen never does, nor does he allow people to do it for him—but if the head of dragon security is a step behind you, who’s going to let the security door slam in his face so he can swipe in? This is an office, not a secure military facility.

And how good *is* this glamor? Good enough to fool biometric scanners?

Good enough to fool Brandt?

The thought of this person being alone with Brandt or Percy makes me sick.

Enderl and the others are waiting for me to answer. “It was his magic,” I manage, then realize I can’t tell them the rest, that Stef’s magic always reaches for me, that I’d know it even if I was half dead... not without giving away our secret. “We have a security protocol,” I prevaricate.

Alistair stiffens, the action so minute I wouldn’t have noticed if I hadn’t been looking at him right that second, and I mentally curse. Dammit. I forgot that he’s trained to recognize the biochemical changes in scent that occur with a lie. I was even the one who worked with him after we migrated, spending hours alternating between telling him lies and truths so he could get a baseline for dragons. He says nothing, but I know I’m going to have to deal with this later.

As though to distract, he steps forward, sniffing. “Whatever this glamor is, it’s incredible. Their scents are almost exactly the same.”

Andrew and Gideon also inhale, then exchange glances. “I know hellhounds have the best sense of smell,” Andrew says slowly, “but are you sure? I can’t smell any difference at all.” He pauses. “Which is fucking weird. Who’s with Sam?” I’m clearly not the only one spooked by the idea that such a perfect disguise exists.

“He’s meeting with David. I sent Noah and Elinor in to stay with them before I came down,” Gideon says. “Can you really scent a difference?”

Alistair crosses the room toward the imposter, quirking a brow at me for permission.

“Stay about six feet away,” I warn. I’m confident the cage will hold—despite the occasional flex I can feel as he tests my magic—but if Alistair gets closer than that, it’ll be harder for me.

He obediently allows plenty of space and inhales deeply. “This is freaky,” he proclaims. “There’s a difference, but it’s... fractional. So small, you’d need to be trained and looking for it to catch it.” He turns to face us with a pained expression. “If I’d walked past this guy in the hall, I don’t think I’d have caught it.”

“That seems to be my cue.” A nervous ripple runs through the room as Brandt walks in, followed by two more of the dragon security team. None of them falter at the sight of two Steffens, probably because they’ve been listening in the hallway all this time. “Step aside, Alistair. Let me have a proper look at him.”

While Alistair moves out of the way, I turn my attention back to the imposter. His mind’s gone absolutely still, not pushing against the cage anymore, and he’s staring directly at Brandt with barely concealed shock.

Brandt stares back steadily, but I know him well enough to see the horror behind the placid mask. What the fuck is going on?

Brandt’s magic envelops mine, weaving around it. It’s complex and intricate, and I can only see about half of it, but when he’s done, he nods at me. “You can let go now.”

Doubt wells in me—what is this glamor, that even Brandt’s magic, backed up by the life force, can’t break it?—but Brandt’s my wing leader and I have absolute trust in him. I let my magic dissipate.

The imposter moves, but not far. Unlike me, Brandt hasn’t locked him in place. He’s able to stand, but the stilted, jerky movements make it seem like he’s wearing invisible shackles. “What are you?” he demands, speaking clearly for the first

time. His voice isn't exactly the same as Stef's. It's close, but there *is* a difference, and more importantly, his accent is stronger... more like Steffen's was when I first met him, in fact.

A sudden, awful suspicion blooms in my mind.

"You're safe now" is all Brandt says in reply, and from the way the imposter's mouth twists like he's been sucking a lemon, he's not convinced. Brandt turns to where Kirsch is silently taking in the whole scene. "We need a secure holding cell. One of the ones graded for dragons." His distaste is clear. With so few dragons, and since our perception of the universe and life is so different to what other species experience, there's very little dragon crime. As in... close to zero. It's been literally centuries since a dragon has committed a crime, any crime, and usually when that happens, Brandt sees to it personally.

But part of the treaty when we migrated to Earth was allowing CSG to fit out a small number of holding cells to detain dragons. Their logic was that if something happened to incapacitate Brandt, there would need to be a way to restrain the perpetrator. Those cells haven't yet been used for dragons... until now, I guess.

"There's one at the Enforcement headquarters outside the city," Kirsch informs him, masking his surprise. Brandt's made his opinion on the cells very clear.

"This is what's going to happen. He doesn't leave this room until everyone's gone home for the day and the hallways are empty. There will be eight guards with him at all times between now and when he's locked in the cell. Two of them must be dragons. Two elves. Two sorcerers. One shifter, and one demon. All combat trained. He receives no visitors save myself, Steffen, and Wil. And Sophie," he adds, his gaze flicking back to the imposter's outraged face. "Steffen will approve a list of guards who will have access to him. Only those people will have access, including to deliver meals."

"Fuck me, who is this guy?" someone whispers.

“Nothing you’ve seen or heard in this room will leave it. I’m not exaggerating when I say this is classified at the highest level. If you give me cause to doubt that you can keep quiet, I *will* have you detained.”

That suspicion solidifies into horrible certainty, and I have to physically stop myself from going to Stef. His face is pale and set.

“I’ll stay here until the guards are assembled,” Brandt concludes. “Gideon, Eoin, would you please tell Sam and the king that we’re going to need a briefing as soon as possible. Wil, call Percy and ask him to come in.”

As people scatter to enact Brandt’s will, his eyes lock with mine, and I see there the depth of his shock and fear.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Steffen

AROUND ME, people are talking quietly and moving, but I'm locked in a haze. How is this possible? How can this be happening?

For once my paranoia is still and quiet. Probably because even when my catastrophizing was at its worst, I never imagined this. Not in the darkest, most terrible conspiracy theory I ever came up with. How could I have?

Wil's magic wraps around me, a comforting blanket, and I cling tightly to it. Brandt, too, reaches out, and his magical touch is imbued with the safety of the wing leader. The eternal support of the life force. Infinite and boundless.

And still... I stare at the interloper. How did we not know?

The answer to that is simple, in the end. We didn't know because we weren't supposed to. Just as Brandt didn't know about me until he laid eyes on me, even though, as the wing leader, he has a connection to all dragons. Éibhear's dark talents and perversity found a way around that.

Damn him. Soul dead, and still I can't escape him. All these years, my fears were right.

And I hate it.

The intruder stares back at me, his eyes boring through me, and if emotions were tangible, I would be incinerated by his loathing. It's lucky for me Wil had him so tightly restrained before I came in—I have no doubt that if not, I'd have been fighting for my life.

It's the strangest thing, staring at my own face like this. I study him carefully, looking for differences, any differences. Even his hair is cut the same as mine. But there, right near the hairline on his left temple... he doesn't have the tiny, faint scar I do, from the time back home when the world was collapsing around us and I got hit by a shard of rock. Sophie healed it, but I told her to leave the scar. And is that a freckle on his earlobe? I don't have one of those. I always spell to protect my skin from the sun because of my paranoia.

Other than those two things, it's like looking at a picture of myself.

I want to ask him questions, but I'm afraid of the answers. Plus, I don't think he'd say anything. Not to me, anyway.

"Steffen?" I tear myself away from my doppelgänger and give my attention to Kirsch. "Enforcement has sent over a list of people they think should be assigned to guard the holding cell." He passes me his tablet, and I scan the list. Beside each name is a notation of their species, experience, years of service, and special skills. I recognize several of them from previous task forces I've worked with.

"Could you email this to me? I want to check a few things. I'll have an answer before he's moved." Elite Enforcement teams are vetted very thoroughly already, so it won't take long for me to confirm they're up to my standard. If anyone really can be, that is. Who knows? If this can happen, can I trust anything?

Nothing is safe.

"No problem," Kirsch assures me, taking his tablet back and tapping the screen. "The interim guards Brandt requested are on their way, and I have my team quietly doing a security check of the whole building. I don't know yet how he got in, but I want to be certain there aren't any other doppelgängers sneaking around."

I want to tell him it's not likely—impossible, in fact—but is it really? If Éibhear could manage this, and if this stranger could stay under the radar for the almost six years that we've been on Earth with no connections and no support, who's to

say what else is out there? For that matter, maybe there's a whole network of Éibhear and Tish's old accomplices that we somehow overlooked. I would have sworn we got them all. That we arrested, tried, and convicted every last one that survived. I spent months exploring every possibility, every trail, every scenario.

But the evidence that we didn't is across the room, dragging up dark memories that will haunt my dreams for months to come.

"Thank you, Kirsch," Wil says, coming to my rescue. He moves to stand beside me. "I appreciate how quickly you responded to my SOS."

Kirsch's smile is small. "Not that you needed us."

"It could have gone the other way." Wil shrugs. "Knowing backup was coming was essential."

One of Kirsch's people calls him, and he turns away, going to meet them. The room is nearly empty now, just me, Wil, Brandt, and Alistair left... and *him*. Wil and I watch as Brandt goes to him and says something. I can't hear any of it, which means Brandt's put up an auditory shield.

The stranger—can I even keep calling him that? I may never have met him before, but I know who he is. Who he *has* to be. He's staring straight ahead, pretending not to listen to Brandt. From the way he reacted to Brandt's presence earlier, I know he was raised the same way I was—without any knowledge of the wing leader's existence. Without any knowledge of how the universe truly works. With his magic bound and restricted. Unable to shift. With no real understanding of who he is.

Brandt says something else, and I see it. The moment. The crack.

The world falls away, and I'm flooded with memories.



4,500 YEARS ago

The door bangs open. “Get up. We’re going.”

I look up from where I’m huddled under the window. It’s too high on the wall for me to see out, painted over so little light gets in, and locked so I can’t open it for fresh air, but it’s still a window. A point of access to outside. I don’t know what exists beyond the bounds of this compound, but several of the scenarios my brain has thrown up suggest it might be marginally better than here.

I don’t speak, don’t make eye contact with Éibhear’s men. Sometimes I’ll be beaten for not speaking or looking them in the eye, but statistically I get beaten more often when I do speak. My last lot of bruises aren’t healed enough yet for me to attempt to gather more data, so I’m playing the odds.

Neither of the men taunts me. Neither says anything nice, either. One hurries into the room and grabs my arm, hauling me to my feet, while the other stays in the doorway, glancing up and down the hall. This is new. They’ve never done this before, not in the thousands upon thousands of days they’ve tormented me.

But I’m not stupid enough to hope. This is just a new way to hurt me. Nothing is safe.

The elf with my arm in a vise grip begins dragging me toward the door. “Don’t slow us down. Do you want to die? They’ll kill you. Keep quiet and keep up.”

I don’t know who he’s talking about, and I don’t understand those words. Die? Kill? What are those? Bad things, from the way he said them. New bad things. Nothing is safe.

The elf in the doorway cries out and crumples to the floor. I stare at him as the one holding my arm lets me go and drops into a defensive position. My skin tingles the way it always does when the elves are spellcasting, and I drop down and curl into a ball. It’s never safe when they’re spellcasting.

A wash of magic floods the room, filling everything, taking over the very air. I don’t like it—it’s spiky, rough—

but... it doesn't hurt. I didn't know it was possible for magic not to hurt.

This is another trick.

I stay curled on the floor until the magic recedes, then wait for whatever is going to happen next.

Footsteps. Voices. "...the spell only showed two, but there's an innocent."

"Are you sure? The rest of the compound is completely clear of innocents. Not even a kitchenhand."

"I'm positive. They have to be here somew— There's one of the soldiers."

The footsteps come closer, then pause. I sense a presence in the doorway but don't look up. Nothing is safe.

"Hello? Hi. Are you okay?"

"Of course he's not okay. Look at him," the other voice hisses. "Is... is he a dragon?"

I stay still. Whatever this is, it's not safe. I've hoped for more before. To leave here and maybe find a better possibility. Every time, it was stolen from me, and things got worse. Hope is a fool's trick. Nothing is safe.

"Definitely a dragon, but... his magic is... Go get Wil."

One set of footsteps rapidly retreats.

"You're safe now," the first voice says. "Fuck, it stinks in here. What did they do to you?"

My muscles start to cramp, but it's a minor discomfort compared to a beating. I don't move.

"Okay. You don't have to talk to me. You're safe, though, okay? Wil's coming. He's a dragon too, and he can... help you." In a whisper, he adds, "I hope."

I say nothing.

Running footsteps echo down the hall. Whoever Wil is, he was close by.

“You found a dragon?” a new voice gasps, and something chases down my spine. It’s not unpleasant... just new. Is this the kill thing? “Oh.”

“He hasn’t moved or said anything,” the first voice says. “I don’t even know if he can hear me.”

Magic skims over me, and I can’t help it: I gasp and jerk away. It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before, not like the spellcasting I’m so used to, and something inside me desperately tries to rise to meet it.

“This is barbaric,” Wil says—the dragon. I don’t know what a dragon is. So many new words today. “Can you hear me?” he asks, coming closer to me and kneeling on the stone floor. He’s less than an arm’s length away; I can tell without looking. Judging the distance between my body and danger is a skill I’ve developed through trial and error. “My name is Wil. I’m a dragon too.” That strange magic touches me again, and I lock every muscle in my body. Nothing’s safe. “What’s your name?”

I say nothing.

“I can tell they’ve hurt you. They’re gone now. We can take you away from here, take you home. Where do you come from?”

Still, I say nothing, but even if I wanted to speak, I don’t understand the question. Where do I come from? Here. I’ve always been here.

Wil shifts position, and when he speaks again, his voice projects in the other direction. “Portal to Brandt. Now, immediately. We need him here.”

The other person doesn’t respond, just races down the hallway in a clatter of footsteps.

“I’m going to sit here and talk to you, okay? You don’t have to talk back. You don’t have to move. If you want to, that’s okay. Make yourself a bit more comfortable. Nobody’s going to hurt you anymore.”

I’ve heard that before. They’d come and tell me I was leaving the compound. That Éibhear didn’t have use for me

anymore; that I was being sent elsewhere. They'd say this was the last beating I'd ever get. The last time someone would stab me with needles. The last time they'd set me on fire.

They lied. Always. Nothing is safe.

“Brandt will fix this. You'll be okay once he gets here. I don't know how long you've been here, but just so you know, he's still just as amazing as he's always been. He'll get rid of that disgusting manacle on your magic, and then he'll take you home to your family.”

I don't understand half of what he's saying, but his voice is nice. As long as I don't outwardly show that I like it, I can enjoy it for as long as it lasts.

We stay like that for a while longer, me carefully still and silent, Wil talking softly about nothing in particular. He says the weather's getting weird, that the anomalies are getting worse. None of it makes sense.

Then I hear the footsteps returning. Several sets this time, enough that I can't immediately tell how many. I clear my mind and focus... three. No, four. Four people coming. Plus Wil makes five. Enough for it to really hurt.

Wil slowly gets to his feet, and I try not to look obvious about bracing. The first kick is always the worst. Even when I'm prepared, it's a shock to my body.

The footsteps stop in the hallway. Only one person walks into the room.

And everything changes.

My head jerks up. What *is* this? In this breathless moment, I'm not afraid. I can't be.

The man who pauses to lay a hand on Wil's shoulder is... special. He's safe.

Nothing is safe. But he is. I don't know how or why. All I know is that every part of me can sense it. He's safe.

He comes to sit beside me, closer than Wil did, and as I stare blankly at him, he reaches out and strokes my cheek gently. “You're safe now.”

And I know it to be absolutely true.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Wil

WE GATHER in the lucifer's office a little over an hour later. It's somewhat cramped, with the lucifer and his team, Brandt, Percy, me, Steffen, and King Raðulfr and his most senior advisors, but the only other logical space is one of the conference rooms, and we don't want to draw that much attention. The fewer people who know this, the better.

Brandt pulled Steffen and me aside before and promised to keep as much of Steffen's story a secret as possible. Stef just gave him a bitter little smile and said, "Tell them what they need to know. Maybe if they'd known everything before, this wouldn't have happened."

Now, I stick to him like glue. He's sitting on one of the desk chairs that was brought in from the outer office, and I'm leaning on the back of it. My pose looks casual, but it allows me to rest my forearm in a position that touches his neck. His magic is twined so tightly with mine that I'm honestly not sure where one ends and the other begins.

The door to the office closes, and we all wait while David and Caolan activate the privacy wards. As soon as they nod, the king turns to Brandt.

"What's happened? All Eoin would tell me is that there was an intruder who looked like Steffen."

"Same," Lucifer Sam says.

"The intruder looked like Steffen?" Percy's voice has a sharp edge. He arrived only ten minutes before this meeting,

and we haven't been able to brief him at all. "As in, he was wearing a disguise?"

Brandt sighs. "You're going to have a lot of questions, and this is a complicated story. I don't know all the details. But there's some background you need first, and a lot of it is... painful. Please, if you could let me tell it as best I can." He meets Percy's gaze. "I hate having secrets from you, but this was never mine to tell. I would have taken it to my grave, and I'm sorry if that hurts you."

Without hesitation, Percy picks up Brandt's hand and kisses it. "Your dedication to your dragons is as much a part of you as everything else I love. I would have fought anyone who tried to make you share those secrets. And nobody here will share them, either." The steely gaze that circles the room is at odds with his usual gentleness, and I remember that moment at the Showdown at Patagonia when calm, mild-mannered Percy ruthlessly ripped out the throat of his enemy.

"This is classified at the highest level," the lucifer says, his tone unyielding. "It gets spoken of only with the people in this room, and only behind wards." His people nod. I can feel Alistair's eyes boring into the side of my head. There hasn't been time for him to talk to me privately about my lie earlier, but I know it's coming.

The king clears his throat. "Any secret held by the dragons is one the elves will defend to the death." His words are quiet, but they ring with authority.

There's a pause while everyone resets from the dramatic moment.

"Let's start with the most important information you need," Brandt begins. "Many of you don't know how dragons procreate."

Alistair looks confused. "You mean it's not sex? But I've met tons of horny dragons. I've been their wingman!"

Lucifer Sam pinches the bridge of his nose. "He's my best friend," he mutters. "Murder is wrong."

“We dragons do enjoy sex,” Brandt continues, winking at Percy, who blushes. “But we don’t procreate that way. If you’ve seen us in dragon form, you may have noticed it doesn’t have reproductive organs.”

It might be the first time ever that I’ve seen Alistair silent with shock. His jaw is slack, and he’s blinking repeatedly.

“Instead, our children are born of our own energy. When a dragon chooses to have a child, they begin shedding scales. Our scales contain a small amount of our personal magic—our energy. When the gathered scales contain enough energy, they transform into an egg.”

Alistair’s jaw is not the only slack one now.

“Sorry—” David clears his throat. “Could I just clarify... your children are essentially clones of you?”

I blink. I’ve never thought of it that way, but I suppose if it’s just a single dragon contributing scales...

“Yes and no. If we were beings like you, then yes, absolutely. Reproducing with a single source of genetic material would result in a clone. But we’re not. We’re beings of pure energy. We chose to transform into physical bodies, and we can choose to reverse that process at any time. The true form of a dragon is electromagnetic impulses with sentience.”

David nods slowly. “This is incredible.”

“Getting back on track, when a dragon pair chooses to have children, they both contribute scales, and thus the energy that creates the egg comes from both of them.”

“And,” Percy interjects with a small smile, “when a dragon-felid couple eventually decide hatchlings are in their future, there’s a way for that to happen too.” He holds up his hands as David half-rises. “Not yet. But soon.”

“Interspecies breeding is entirely possible with dragons,” Brandt continues. “But the child is always a dragon. There’s no way around that. I...” He falters. “When our world was falling apart and we were offered sanctuary here, we learned of the plot Éibhear and Tish were constructing.”

“We remember,” Gideon growls.

“The spell to compel the life force into a human body required the willing flame of a dragon.”

“Yes,” Noah agrees. “They’d kidnapped the baby.”

Brandt shakes his head. “The baby was their second choice. Many years before, not long after Éibhear defied the request to stop using temporal portals, DEA soldiers raided his compound. They were able to capture some of his people, although he and his lieutenants got away. And they found—”

“The dragon captive,” the king interrupts. “There was a kidnapped dragon held captive. I remember—I asked you at the time why you hadn’t told me one of your people was missing. I would have helped with the search.”

“I know.” Brandt’s nod is slow. “But I couldn’t tell you then... none of our people were missing. I had no idea that dragon existed until that day.”

The king blinks slowly, and then his head snaps around to stare at Steffen. He remembers it all now—I can see in his expression. Remembers that Stef was that captive dragon.

“Maybe I’m missing something,” Elinor says hesitantly, “but if that dragon was rescued way back then, I don’t see the connection to today?”

“Brandt,” Lucifer Sam begins, horror echoing in his voice, “are you saying Éibhear somehow bred a dragon to use in his plans?”

Stef jolts slightly at the bluntness of the statement, and I press my arm firmly against his neck. *You’re not alone.*

His magic clings even tighter.

The room is still, tense, as everyone waits for Brandt’s reply.

He nods.

Fury erupts.

It’s a long few minutes before the room settles enough for us to continue. Steffen’s mood shifts, lifting a little.

They care, I tell him.

I know. It's still hard to trust.

There's nothing I can say to that.

"I should have made it hurt more," Caolan bites out viciously. "He didn't suffer enough."

"He didn't." King Raðulfr is staring at Steffen with tears in his eyes. He was there—he came with Brandt through the portal. He heard the reports from me and the rest of the team. He saw the room we found Stef in. Saw Stef. The rest of the story—the background, the details—was known only to me, Brandt, and Steffen... and Éibhear and his goons. But they're dead... we thought.

One by one, then a few at a time, heads turn toward me and Stef. Realization dawns.

I glance at Brandt, wondering how he wants to handle this.

"I don't know how I came to be," Steffen says, surprising me—all of us. "Brandt says my genetic material is from a philosophical dragon who liked to wander alone. She passed into the ether around the time we believe I was hatched. I have no memory of her." His tone is flat—these are facts, nothing more, never mind that he's speaking about himself. His mother. "We don't know how Éibhear gained possession of me. I have no memory of a time before that. When the assault team found me, it was the first time I left Éibhear's compound."

Brandt picks the story up again. "We don't know much about Steffen's origins or Éibhear's plans for him. At the time I met him, I was able to recognize who his mother was and estimate his age. I didn't know why Éibhear would want a captive dragon, one he... raised... himself. Not until we came here and worked out what his plan was, that he needed a dragon."

"I'm sorry I didn't make him suffer more," Caolan tells Steffen, all the anger gone from his voice. "If I'd known, he would have died in agony."

“He died. He’s gone. That was the most important part.” Stef takes a deep breath. “But thank you.”

“Wait,” Alistair says. “Wait. Wait. Are you... What are you saying?” He shakes his head. “Éibhear somehow got his hands on a baby dragon or a dragon egg or a bunch of dragon scales and bred a dragon so he could carry out his evil plan. That was Steffen. But he got rescued. So is this whole backstory your way of telling us that the dragon today wasn’t wearing some kind of glamor or disguise?”

“Their genetic material is the same. The life force says they’re twins.”

I close my eyes and try to surround Stef with my presence. I knew it. I’ve known it since that moment in our office. Nothing else made sense. But hearing it out loud is a blow.

“Twins?” Andrew says blankly. “You’re telling us that Steffen literally has an evil twin?”

Noah elbows him hard. “Not the time.”

“Evil is a strong word,” Percy adds. “Do we know anything about him?”

“He’s not ready to speak to me yet,” Brandt admits. “I’ve probably made it more difficult by putting him under such strict guard, but I have to assume he was also... raised... by Éibhear and his presence here—and the obvious animosity he feels for Steffen—are significant.”

There’s a little silence as we all digest that. The possibility that Éibhear and Tish left behind a compound or team or anybody that we didn’t find is... chilling.

“But if Éibhear and Tish had... I don’t know what to call him. If they had the twin, why did they steal the baby dragon?” Gideon asks.

Brandt shrugs. “We don’t know. That’s a big concern. I hope to learn more, but for now, we need to assume the worst.”

“That there’s a faction remaining who may intend to revive Tish and Éibhear’s plan,” David says heavily. “We made sure

that wouldn't be possible... but we didn't think anyone was left, either."

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CHAPTER TWENTY

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Steffen

“SO, WHAT ARE OUR NEXT STEPS?” Noah asks. His voice is trembling slightly—so slightly, I don’t think anyone else noticed. I did, though. I know what he’s thinking. He was a captive of Tish’s. His captivity might not have lasted as long as mine, but the effect on the psyche is the same.

And to finally have felt safe, to know your tormentor was gone forever, then have that ripped away... we’re both feeling that now.

Nothing is safe.

“I’ll spend some time with... the twin. Try to find out his name, at least.” Brandt hesitates for a second, probably remembering that he helped me choose my name after the rescue because I’d never been given one before. But this... the other... *he* isn’t locked in a filthy room, huddling in a corner and hoping to be forgotten about today. He’s wandering around of his own free will. He probably has a name.

Bitterness fills me, the taste of it acrid on my tongue. I’m grateful for my life. For Brandt and Wil—especially Wil—and my other friends. It’s not always easy, but I earned it. I paid for it with torment and blood. If *he* was raised with care and respect and a place among Éibhear’s associates... I don’t envy him that. I don’t want that. Maybe I would have, once, but if I’d had that, I couldn’t have this, and there’s nothing in existence that could compel me to give up Wil.

But I want to know why.

Twins. Two of us. Why were we treated so differently?

Or... were we?

If I hadn't been rescued, would I eventually have become what he is now? Was Éibhear breaking me so completely that he would be able to rebuild me in whatever mold he chose?

But I never had anything to break. He had me from hatching. I was already malleable clay to be molded.

So the question remains: Why?

The warm pressure of Wil's forearm brings me back from the endless loop of questions, and I lean slightly into it. I have Wil. Nothing else matters.

Except... this whole time, I was right. Éibhear might be gone, but there are still those who would use Wil to hurt me.

Nothing's safe.

Brandt's still speaking. "...have Sophie check him as well. He seemed healthy, but a proper medical assessment is necessary." He hesitates again. "And a mental health check."

"Is it possible he was also born with paranoia?" Noah asks, then looks at me. "I'm sorry, I don't want to be offensive. But is that more likely in identical twins?"

I can't help the laugh. It bubbles up and bursts from me, somewhat hysterical, and from the startled and concerned looks, it's not helping me seem sane.

"Actually," Wil says, coming to my rescue, "both mental health issues and twins are unheard of in dragons."

I get myself under control as a murmur of confusion ripples around the room. "I wasn't always paranoid," I announce. "I remember a time when I wasn't. But it began to develop when I was still a fledgling."

"We believe it was a trauma response." Brandt takes over. "Dragons are beings of electrical impulses. Our brains don't work like any of yours. There is not a single record in all our history of a dragon with a mental health problem. Steffen's personality evolved to protect him from his environment."

As that sinks in and they realize what my environment must have been like, pity flashes across most of their faces. Gideon, though, looks me right in the eye. “Survivor.”

My paranoia, which has been quietly doing a background assessment of how many of them will treat me differently now, falters. I remember what happened that time I thanked it; Wil’s theory that maybe it just needed to be acknowledged. My brain evolved to protect me. My paranoia is the reason I survived my captivity with any spirit left. My paranoia allowed me to safely explore the new world I was thrust into after my rescue.

I survived. I’m a survivor.

I’m not broken.

I lift my chin at Gideon in acknowledgment.

“I also don’t recall there ever being twin dragons before,” the king says thoughtfully. “I thought perhaps it was super rare and there just hadn’t been any in my time.”

Brandt shakes his head. “We have no record of twins, ever. How could there be, when our eggs form from energy? The scales don’t transform into an egg until there’s enough energy there to create a hatchling.”

“What if there was an excess of energy?” David asks intently. “If, say, two sets of scales were collected, then brought together at just the right moment into one... group. I’m sorry, I don’t know what terminology to use.”

“Group is fine. In a situation like that—and it has been tried before—the result is always two eggs or a single egg with a greater amount of power. Several research papers have been written on the subject. They’re in the living archive, if you’d like to read them. Or Fabian could probably tell you about it.” He shakes his head. “But we’ve never had twins. I don’t want to say it’s impossible, because clearly it isn’t, but I don’t believe it was spontaneous.”

That’s a reassuring thought—Éibhear likely didn’t just find me as an egg or hatchling, he *designed* me and somehow manipulated the natural order of things to create me and... my twin.

Those words feel so unnatural.

“Okay,” David says slowly. “Okay. There’s a lot we don’t know. Brandt, if you need any support from us in debriefing the twin, it’s yours. The sooner we can get some answers...”

“I’m also happy to help if he needs care,” Sam adds. “Whatever he’s in the middle of now, it’s likely a result of Éibhear’s brainwashing. We need to do whatever we can for him.”

I push aside my mixed reaction to that.

“In the meantime, we need to assume we’re at risk. High alert.” Gideon stands and paces to the window. “Steffen, I know you have a lot on your plate already right now, not to mention everything that happened today, but could you—”

“Yes.” Of course. We need a risk assessment immediately, and I’m the best person to do that. My brain’s already started working on it.

Well... my brain started working on it years ago. There was always a low-priority “what if some of them survived” scenario. I just didn’t think it would actually be likely.

“What exactly happened today?” Alistair asks Wil. “We got your message and came running, but I still don’t know what he was doing.”

Behind me, Wil’s arm shifts, and I assume he’s shrugging. “I don’t know what he was after. He walked in. I saw him and had to hide my double take. I knew he wasn’t Steffen. I pretended I didn’t until I was sure backup was coming. He went to Stef’s computer and tried to log in.”

“Did he?” Percy asks in alarm, and I shake my head. I already checked.

“No. But from what little I could see, he was credibly attempting to hack in. That’s when I hit him with the magic cage.” There’s a pause. “He wasn’t expecting it, which gave me the advantage, but there was something not right about his magic.”

“Agreed,” Brandt says. “I’ll look into it when I speak with him.”

“Wait, if he’s identical to Steffen, how did you guess right away?” Elinor asks.

I field that question this time, wanting to make it seem more natural. “Wil and I have a security protocol. When my magic didn’t respond, he knew it couldn’t be me.”

She looks doubtful. “You didn’t just think it might be, like, a glitch or something? What made you immediately think ‘this person looks exactly like Steffen but has to be an imposter’?”

Wil chuckles. “I also told him I forgot to get his coffee and offered him mine, and he acted like that was normal.”

I shake my head. “He’s definitely not me, then.” I’m not sure if I’m so overloaded by the events of the day that my reactions are off, but I’m hit with the overwhelming need to laugh. Wil joins me.

“I don’t get it,” Andrew says.

“Steffen doesn’t drink coffee. Caffeine doesn’t go well with his paranoia,” Percy says, smiling indulgently at me. “He also doesn’t drink from any cup prepared by a stranger. So no take-out drinks.”

A few of them chuckle, but the lucifer makes a wondering sound. “That’s interesting. He knew enough about you to copy your haircut and clothes, knew exactly where your office is, but hasn’t been watching closely enough to know you never drink take-out drinks. Or coffee at all.”

“I try not to be easy to spy on.” And I’m super pissed that someone still managed it.

“But it’s even more evidence that we need a security review. He’s obviously been in the building before, been able to wander around and get familiar with it—obviously nobody would question Steffen being here, and as long as he stayed away from the real Steffen...”

David sighs. “What a mess.”

“I’ll take that,” Alistair says. “Stef, if you can send me your schedule for the last, let’s say, three months? I’ll check the CCTV footage and see if ‘you’ were anywhere you... weren’t.” He stops. “Whoa, that’s a trippy sentence.”

As reluctant as I am to entrust anyone with my schedule, he’s only asking for things that have already happened. And it’s Alistair. Wil trusts him. I might even trust him.

“It will take me some time to write it all down, but the easiest thing to check is weekends. It’s been at least six months since we’ve stayed in the city for the weekend. If someone who looks like me was in the office anytime between five thirty on a Friday and eight thirty on a Monday, that was him.”

“I can start there,” Alistair declares.

“I can show you how to download everything from your scheduling app,” Noah offers. “Save you having to copy it all down.”

Wil’s arm tenses against my neck, and his mirth flows through his magic to me. “Thank you,” I say politely, “but I don’t have a scheduling app.”

“You keep a paper diary? We can just photocopy that. The photocopier is an asshole, but I’ve made it my bitch.”

This time Wil laughs out loud.

“I don’t keep a record of my schedule anywhere. I memorize it so nobody can ever know what my movements will be. It also means they can’t just add me to meetings.” Which is a nice side bonus.

Noah studies me for a moment, then says, “We should be better friends. I could learn a lot from you. Do you know an easy way to make people fuck off?”

I shrug. “Telling them to fuck off usually works. But if you mean a polite way, I—”

“Okay, that’s enough of that. Let’s not get off track,” Percy interrupts, but he’s grinning. “Noah, I’m sure you can find another time for Stef to mentor you.”

“I’ll call you,” Noah promises.

I think I’ve made a friend? That’s weird. Normally all my friends are secondhand—they like Brandt or Wil or someone else, so they get me by default. Wil’s the only friend who’s wanted just me, no pressure, no obligation.

I wait for my paranoia to throw up a hundred different reasons why this is a bad thing. All the ways Noah could be using me. The ways he could be planning to hurt me and my loved ones. The farfetched plot with which he plans to destroy the world. But none of that happens.

Maybe it’s too busy mapping out the ways my newly discovered identical twin brother plans to annihilate me.

“Okay,” David says. “Security review. Disaster planning. Debrief the prisoner. Anything else?”

“Any chance the magic wants to give us some hints?” Andrew asks Sam.

He shakes his head. “It’s not sharing anything with me.”

“Me either,” King Raðulfr says.

“When I saw the twin, it confirmed his identity, but that’s it, I’m afraid,” Brandt adds. “I suppose it wants us to do some more legwork first.”

“Or it doesn’t know,” I suggest. “Wasn’t that what happened last time? Until something happened to bring its attention to Éibhear and his plans, it didn’t know what was happening.” That’s how Éibhear was able to hide me from Brandt, when the wing leader has always been able to feel the existence of every dragon. The life force is everything, but there’s a lot of “everything” out there. It’s hard to keep track of every little atom all the time.

“Either way, we’ve got work to do.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Wil

THE SECOND THE door closes behind us, I get Stef's embroidery bag. I don't wait for him to finish his security check; I don't care that it's late and we're exhausted and need to be up early tomorrow. He's going to need decompression time. I'm low-key shocked he made it through the afternoon and evening without his paranoia taking over.

Then again, his paranoia is probably singing and dancing some version of "I told you so" right now. All these millennia, people have been smiling indulgently at his conspiracies or calling him a crackpot... and in the space of weeks, he's been proved right twice. Though I'm not sure he ever suggested he might have an identical twin brother who was separated from him at hatching and also raised by an evil supergenius who planned to destroy the natural order of the universe and use the twins to help him do it. That's a bit farfetched, even for Steffen.

When he finishes his circuit, he comes back to the living room. His gaze falls on me, curled on the couch with my tablet in hand, his project bag beside me, and some of the stress lines around his eyes ease.

"You're tired," he says. "You should go to bed." But he joins me, sitting closer than usual, and fishes out a tiny onesie.

"We have plenty of time to sleep." I wake up my tablet, but to my surprise, Stef continues talking.

"I'm so glad you're okay."

Oh. I put down the tablet and look at him. His eyes are focused on the precise stitches he's sewing, but his magic is still twined tightly with mine. We haven't let go of each other since he walked into our office and saw his twin.

"I was so afraid," I begin, "when I realized he wasn't you. Terrified that he'd hurt you. He paid hardly any attention to me. I don't think I was in any danger—I think his goal was to get information and get out without anyone realizing it had been stolen. Hurting me would have raised the alarm sooner."

He nods. "That makes sense. It's logical. But... he was alone in that room with you. If you hadn't realized he wasn't me... he could have taken you by surprise." He swallows. "And... you saw how he looked at me. He hates me. If he'd somehow found out about us..."

Shit. *Shit*. So much for any progress being made on that front. "Nobody knows about us," I remind him quietly, shoving aside the memory of Alistair's reaction when he caught me in the lie. He doesn't *know*. He might have suspicions, but that's not knowing. And he might not even suspect. Maybe he thinks it's something else entirely that made me lie.

Fuck, life is complicated.

"Nobody knows about us, and nobody has to know." Those words burn my throat, but I won't ever push Steffen out of his safe zone. "He might have been brainwashed to hate you, but I also saw how he reacted to Brandt. Just like you did. He knows nothing about being a dragon. Nothing about a healthy family. Once he unpacks his trauma, things might be different."

He's quiet for a second, stitching carefully. "Maybe."

I study the side of his face, trying to get a read on what he's thinking. "Do you not want that?"

"No. I mean, I don't want him to suffer." He doesn't take his eyes off what he's doing. "If he went through what I did, then he needs support and he needs Brandt. I want him to be able to heal and know what it's truly like to be a dragon."

Even... even if he didn't go through what I did, he deserves to understand what he is. I wouldn't want to deny him access to Brandt and dragonkind—as long as he stopped with whatever it is that had him pretending to be me so he could break into the office and steal information.” He falls silent. “But...”

I wait for him to complete the thought.

“I don't know if I want to be his brother.”

My first, instinctive reaction is negative. We dragons procreate so rarely that siblings, especially siblings close in age, are very uncommon. Twins are unheard of. The idea that he could have that and reject it is alien to me.

But Steffen's experience isn't like mine. I grew up in a loving home, doted on by my parents and indulged by any adult dragon who happened to meet me, as all fledglings are—should be. The concepts of close family and immediate acceptance of all dragons are inbuilt in me. Stef's childhood, on the other hand, was a misery of torment, not even knowing or understanding what he really was, learning to hide his true wants and needs, learning to anticipate the moods of others to mitigate his own suffering. Family, to him, is something you build. You meet people and get to know them and decide if you want them in your life, and then you work to keep them there. Unconditional acceptance just because of a coincidence of birth is something he knows nothing about, and every time I'm reminded of that, my heart aches for him.

If he's not sure about accepting a stranger as his brother, then he needs me to support that.

“You don't have to be,” I say simply. “But don't worry about that yet. First let's see if he's even willing to give up his life as a supervillain.” The words seem light, but they're deadly serious. I don't know what actions will need to be taken if Stef's twin—we really need to find out his name—refuses to let go of whatever mission Éibhear gave him before he was executed.

Unless... maybe there was no mission? Maybe he's decided we killed the only father figure he had—which is a

troubling thought all on its own—and has developed his own plans for revenge?

What a comforting thought.

“It’s not that simple,” Stef counters quietly, and it takes me a second to remember what we were talking about. Right. Him not being sure he wanted to claim his brother.

“Maybe not to everyone,” I concede, “but the people who count will understand. And if they don’t, fuck them. We don’t need that in our lives.”

His hand freezes midstitch.

“What?” I ask, going on high alert as I glance around. “Did you hear something?”

“It’s that easy for you? You’d cut people out just because they can’t understand my perspective?”

Oh. I relax back into the couch. “No, I’d cut them out if they refused to *accept* your perspective and allow you to live your life the way you choose. You don’t harm anyone, Steffen. In fact, you go out of your way to help whenever you can because of some misplaced sense of inherited guilt.” I regret saying that the second the words are out of my mouth and race on. “Nobody gets to harangue you or make you feel bad because you’d prefer not to have someone in your life. They might not fully understand why, but that’s their problem, not yours. They don’t get to force their preferences on you.”

He carefully weaves the needle into the fabric and sets the onesie aside, then leans over and kisses me hard. I respond instantly, the way I always do. I’ll never get enough of Steffen.

“Top me,” he mutters between kisses. “I need you to.”

“You sure?” We do that sometimes, especially when Stef’s feeling insecure.

He nods and kisses me again. “Yes.”

That’s all the confirmation I need. We part for long enough to dump his embroidery stuff and my tablet on the floor, and then I push him down onto the long couch. We stretch out, me lying over him, pushing his body into the plush cushions, and

for a little while, we just make out, enjoying being close to each other.

But then Steffen starts to get impatient, his hands tugging at my clothes, fussing with buttons, so I break the kiss and sit up. “Come on, then. Clothes off.”

It takes barely thirty seconds for us to be naked and back on the couch, and it’s definitely no hardship to have my bare body pressed to his. He parts his legs, letting me settle between them, and our hard cocks rub together.

“I love you,” I tell him. He seems slightly less stressed already, and the words relax him even more. I even get a small smile.

“You loving me is the only thing that got me through today.” He pulls me even closer. “I want you in me. I don’t want there to be any space between us.”

I drop a kiss on his beautiful mouth, then slide down his body to lick and suck at his pebbled nipples while I spell up some lube.

He starts to sit up. “Let me do it,” he murmurs, but I shake my head, pushing him back down.

“No, then I have to move. And I like it here.” I bite his left nipple for emphasis, and he subsides without complaint. I slide my hand down between his legs, and he obediently pulls his knees up, giving me the access I need to prep him. I go slow, since we do this so infrequently, making sure to keep up with the nipple play and also to brush against his prostate a few times, and by the time I’m confident he’s ready, he’s humming with pleasure.

“Be me,” he mutters, and I know exactly what he means. I know that feeling of having him in me so deep, our magic so tightly entwined, that it feels like we’re one. That he’s me, and I’m him.

I get onto my knees and position myself at his hole, smoothing my hands along the warm skin of his flanks and then hooking his knees over my forearms. He meets my gaze and purses his lips in a kiss.

And I push all the way home.

We both moan, Steffen finishing on a gasp. “Yessss. More.”

I set up a fast, hard rhythm, pounding into Stef with all my strength, loving the way he tightens around me, trying to hold me in on each withdrawal.

“Needed this,” he whispers, eyes hazy. “So good.”

I heft his legs higher, forcing them closer to his chest, changing the angle, and the sound that’s torn from his throat is music to my ears.

“Wil... more...”

Sweat trickles down my spine as I continue to power into him. Watching him let go of all his fears and worries... I could do this all day.

He closes his hand around his cock, pulling up in fast, rough motions.

“That’s cheating,” I chide, starting to feel a little breathless.

“Want to come with you in me.”

That’s almost enough to send me over the edge, and he knows it, because he picks up the pace, matching his movement to my thrusts, until he gives a choked gasp and his whole body goes rigid, clamping down around my dick.

Orgasm takes us both, and we fly entwined with our magic.

When my vision clears and I can think again, I’m sprawled over Steffen, his arms tight around me.

“Thank you,” he whispers, and I know he doesn’t mean for the sex.

“Never thank me for loving you like you deserve.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Steffen

I FOLLOW a pace behind Brandt as he strides down the hallway of the Enforcement building. Brandt would prefer that I walk beside him—he’s told me so on many, many occasions—but this time I’m off the hook, because Sophie is at his side, and it would be rude of us to walk three abreast in this hallway. Or at least, that’s what I’ll say if the subject comes up.

Truthfully, hanging back right now gives me a tiny bit of space to process my dread and fear. I don’t want to be in the same room as *him* again. Don’t want to hear him talk. Don’t want any of it. If I’d had my way, Wil would be here with Brandt and I’d be back at the office trying to work out what’s going on while drowning under what was already an out-of-control workload. But Brandt didn’t give us the option of deciding who was coming with him, and when I tried to suggest a swap, he looked me in the eye and said, “No.”

That was it. No explanation. No persuasion. Just “No.” And since Brandt is rarely autocratic or dictatorial, that left me with no choice. For whatever reason, he—and probably the life force—wants me here.

He stops in front of a secure steel door. After the holding cell was constructed, CSG asked us to inspect it and verify that it would actually contain a dragon, so I’ve been here before. I know that on the other side of this alarm-coded door is a small anteroom where the on-duty guards stay. Beyond that is the cell itself, a room so heavily warded with magic—dragon, elven, and sorcerer—that I can feel the tingle of it from here. The cell is divided by a wall of bars, lowering the risk posed

by allowing visitors. Not that *he* is allowed visitors. We already had to undergo biometric and magic scanning to verify our identities to get this far, and if the guards on the other side of this door value their jobs, they'll do it again.

"When we go in," Brandt begins, "Stef, you'll wait in the front room and listen. Don't come in unless I call you."

"Absolutely not." I'm not letting him go in there alone with someone who actively worked to destroy us all.

"He might not talk if he sees you," Brandt argues.

"He probably won't talk anyway." I don't really believe that—I remember what it felt like, meeting Brandt. How much it hurt anytime he was away from me in those first few days. It was like I'd had a blanket over my head my whole life, and suddenly it was gone and the air I was breathing was so much fresher. My mind cleared, and energy raced through every single cell of my body. I could hear and see and feel like I'd never been able to before. *He* felt that for the first time ever yesterday, and I can guarantee he's desperate to feel it again. There's no comfort quite like being in the wing leader's presence and knowing that no matter how crazy this universe is, you *belong*.

Brandt doesn't bother to debate or negotiate, just puts a hand on my arm. "Stay in the front room."

"He's dangerous. I can't—"

"It's not up for discussion, Steffen." He uses his wing leader voice, and I subside. Brandt almost never uses that voice, and especially not with me. "Unless there's a specific, immediate danger, stay in the front room." I nod, and he looks me dead in the eye. "Thank you. I know this isn't easy. How are you doing? Paranoia under control?"

I shrug. "We have too many actual problems right now for my brain to worry about possible ones." That's true—my paranoia has been focused on finding solutions right now. It's been immensely helpful, and Wil's theory about acknowledging it and giving it tasks has so far proven valid.

When things settle down, it's something I'll have to explore in more depth.

“Do you need anything from me?” Sophie asks. “You’ve been under a lot of stress lately. And this...” She shakes her head. “I don’t think anyone could have been ready for this.”

Surprising all of us, I take her hand and give it a light squeeze before letting go again. It only takes a few seconds, but I’m not one for casual touches at all—except for Wil, behind closed doors, which neither of them knows anything about. It’s impossible not to remember my first meeting ever with Sophie, when she cried over my bruises as she healed them and thousands of years of abuse and Brandt had to explain to me that she didn’t like knowing I’d suffered.

Since then, she’s healed me on a myriad of other occasions, often with great reluctance on my part, but never on hers. She’s fierce, fearless, and fascinated by science, but her role as healer of all dragons is a calling larger than anything else in her life. And I know everything in her is straining right now with the knowledge there’s another dragon she never knew about who might need to be looked after.

“I’m okay,” I promise her. “And I’ll stay in the front room.” It hurts my jaw to form those words, but I manage it.

“Can I hug you?” Sophie asks impulsively. I’m pretty sure the only reason she didn’t just do it is because of what happened when Fabian hugged me last year.

I think about it. “Not right now, if that’s okay. Maybe later.” I’m too on edge in this place, with *him* so close and so many strangers around us.

From the way Sophie beams, you’d think I’d just promised her diamonds instead of a maybe-hug later. I guess Wil’s right about people caring about me.

It’s a strange thought.

Brandt smiles warmly at me, then taps in the code on the electronic lock and presses his thumb to the biometric pad. It looks like a regular fingerprint reader, but in addition to that, it also magically reads biorhythms. It can tell if the person being

scanned is who they're supposed to be and if they're under the influence of any drug that might be impacting their behavior or rationality. I wish Brandt would let me install them at the office and Here Be Dragons, but he claims that would be "overkill."

The lock beeps and disengages, and Brandt opens the door and walks through. We don't follow—the sensors and wards in the doorframe will trigger if more than one person enters at a time. Each person who goes through this door—in or out—needs to enter the code and be scanned.

I love it so much.

Sophie goes next, and then it's my turn. When I get inside, Brandt is talking quietly with one of the guards on duty while the other one scans Sophie and signs her in. These measures might seem extreme for one person whose only crime, that we know of, is impersonating me to enter a secure government office, but after everything we've been through at the hands of his... associates, we're not taking any risks.

My gaze lands on the door across the room. *He's* behind it. Wil asked me last night what it had felt like when I'd seen *him* for the first time... whether there had been any mystical twin connection between us. After all, we were born of the exact same energy. We shared an egg. We're the only dragon twins to ever have existed.

But there was nothing. Shock at seeing someone who looked just like me, then more shock when I realized it couldn't be a glamor. When I realized who he had to be. Fear, knowing how close Wil had been to danger. Confusion at *his* hatred. But a connection? No. He's a stranger to me.

"Name, sir?" the guard, an incubus with a very distinguished service history, asks me. He knows who I am—we've met several times before—and I nod approvingly at him for requiring me to undergo the full security process. He studies my face closely as I get signed in, and I know he's looking for any differences between me and the man he's guarding. The sooner we get this done, the better.

Finally, with all our identities verified, we turn toward the inner door. “Steffen will stay in here,” Brandt tells the guards. “I’d like to leave the door open, if that’s okay?”

“It’s required,” the other guard, a hulking demon, says gruffly, no note of apology in his voice. “Policy. And one of us has to be in there with you.”

I smile. It’s so lovely to hear them enforcing my security policies, even in the face of the wing leader himself. It gives me warm and fuzzy feelings.

“That’s fine with me,” Brandt assures him, sliding a sideways look at me. I make myself stop smiling, but he grins anyway.

The incubus retreats toward the other side of the room, and the demon steps up to the control panel on the cell door. The setup here is somewhat simpler—it requires a code and biometric scan to unlock, but just once instead of for each person. However, the doorway scans each person as they walk through, and then when they leave, if they don’t precisely match, the whole facility locks down. This enables the guards to gain fast access and exit from the cell if necessary but prevents the occupant of the cell from overpowering them and walking out. And yes, it was my idea.

The lock disengages, and the demon opens the door and steps through. “You have visitors,” I hear him say as Brandt and Sophie follow. Part of me wants to stand right in front of the doorway so I can see what’s going on in there, but I force myself to go lean against the wall beside the door instead. Brandt’s right—based on the way *he* looked at me yesterday, it’s unlikely he’ll talk if he knows I’m here.

Not that he’s talking right now anyway.

“Good morning,” Brandt says pleasantly. “Do you remember me from yesterday? I’m Brandt, and I’m the wing leader of dragons.”

No response.

“This is Sophie, our healer. Are you injured in any way? Even old injuries that might not have healed right. She can

help you.”

Nothing.

“Could you tell us your name?” Sophie asks. “Or at least part of it. Just so we have something to call you.”

Silence.

“That’s fine,” Brandt continues. “We’ll just tell you about ourselves, then. I’ve already mentioned that we’re dragons. You’re one too—I don’t know if you’re aware of that. I’m sorry about the cell, by the way. This isn’t normally how we’d welcome a dragon who’d been lost to us... not that it happens a lot. You’re only the second one ever in our recorded history. We’re a bit concerned about the fact that you were trying to hack into our secure servers, though. Until we can sort that out, we need to protect our people and our allies.” He sighs. “Is there anything you’d like to know? Anything I can say to reassure you? I know you can sense our bond through the life force. That’s because I’m your wing leader. Your magic recognizes me on an instinctive level.” He pauses for a beat, hoping for a reply.

“Why?” The stranger’s voice is a little rusty, probably from not being used for eighteen hours, but I recognize it from yesterday. It’s similar to mine, but not the same. And there’s that accent, the same inflection Éibhear and most of his people had. That *I* had. It’s distinctly elven, but also very old-fashioned. Many millennia ago, elves spoke two dialects: “highborn” and common. All elves learned common, but only highborn elves were permitted to learn and speak highborn. Actual highborn or noble families don’t exist among elves, not in the way humans define it, since the king is a species leader selected by the life force rather than a hereditary position, and their advisors are the same. But most societies have subjects of people who think they’re better than everyone else, and all those generations ago, a collection of wealthy and influential elf families decided to create a dialect to make themselves seem special.

Over time, use of highborn faded out, but a certain accent remained, delineating through speech those who belonged to

the hereditary “noble” families. Éibhear was from one of those families, and since he and his people were the ones I learned speech from, that’s how I spoke until I was rescued. My accent gradually faded as I spent time around dragons—and elves who don’t think the universe centers on them—but this seems to be even more proof that my twin has never been away from Éibhear’s people.

“Why does your magic recognize me?” Brandt asks. “Were you taught about the life force?”

“The energy that makes up the universe,” he says gruffly. “That’s more than I was ever taught while in Éibhear’s “care.”

“Yes. It imbues every living thing. It also selects a leader for each species, someone to guide and govern. Those leaders are instantly recognizable to everyone within that species, even if they’ve never met before. You are a dragon, and I am the dragon species leader, and our connection through the life force is why your magic recognizes me.”

The silence this time is uneasy and dripping with suspicion.

“Ah,” Brandt says, and sorrow drips from his voice. “I suspect you’ve been taught something else.”

“The life force imbues every living thing, but you and your *allies* have enslaved it and bent it to your evil will!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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Steffen

I STRAIGHTEN, not liking his tone. Even knowing he's separated from Brandt by magically reinforced bars doesn't ease my tension.

"Oh, my dear," Sophie says, and I recognize that tone. That's her "you're so wrong and I'm going to explain it to you in great detail in a way that will make you feel like a complete idiot" tone. If you're stupid enough to ignore the tone and push on with whatever misguided thing you were saying, she follows up by kicking your ass. Healers know where to hit so it *really* hurts.

"It's okay, Soph," Brandt says, still sounding sad. "That's what he was taught." He pauses, and I'm sure he's studying the stranger, trying to get a proper read of him. "I'm here now. Only you can say if you believe it to be true."

"Shut up. I can't think..." Silence descends again.

And lingers.

Tension creeps up my spine, and my paranoia stirs. It knows Brandt is fine, knows that me going in there would only make things worse... but it hates not being able to see what's happening. Hates not being able to look at *him* and judge the situation firsthand.

I take a breath—a measured, even breath. *Thank you for your concern*, I tell it silently. *I could really use your focus on other matters right now. You've already made this situation as safe as it can be.*

And just like that, my paranoia subsides, that corner of my brain going back to running probable scenarios wherein the remnants of Éibhear's people try to take us down. I think I've finally found a way to work with it.

"I... I don't know," the stranger rasps from the cell, and for the first time since I learned of his existence, I sympathize with him. True, bone-deep, heartfelt sympathy. I've been where he is. I've had my whole world turned upside down, no matter that my world was awful. It was still hard to leave it behind and start completely anew, to learn that what I thought I *knew* was false and that I was an oddity to everyone. Because he might be saying he doesn't know, but I recognize that note of desperation. He knows. Deep down, he knows that what Brandt says is true, and he's not ready to acknowledge that.

It would mean admitting that everything about him, his whole life, is a lie.

"You don't need to decide right away," Brandt assures him. "Is there anything you particularly like to eat or drink? Or could we bring you a book? Security policy limits the items you can have, but I'd like you to be as comfortable as possible while you're processing all this."

"D-Do you have any himbcláid?" he asks, and as though conjured by the word, the memory of the taste bursts across my tongue. I blink before my eyes have the chance to tear up.

"No, I'm sorry. We weren't able to bring any native foods when we fled. It was too risky for the ecosystem and for our anonymity here... and we were focused more on saving lives." Brandt sighs, probably wishing we'd been able to bring *some* things along. "Some of us find that raspberry-infused dark chocolate ganache has a similar flavor. I can bring you some of that, if you'd like?"

Meh. It's close but lacks the tangy finish. The stranger agrees, however, which pleases Brandt. I can sense his satisfaction.

"Is it okay with you if Sophie does a health check? It's completely noninvasive, and she won't act on what she finds without your permission."

“How does it work?” The note of suspicion is back.

Lucky for him, Sophie’s so excited by the question that she ignores the tone. She doesn’t often get to explain this stuff—most adults don’t care, and most kids trust her blindly. “It’s very simple,” she begins. “My magic will scan your physical body for any injuries or system abnormalities. I expect I’ll find that you’re a bit stressed right now. You might feel a very faint tingle, but a lot of people don’t feel anything. It will take less than a minute to do a full scan.”

I lean against the wall again as he grumbles his consent. It usually takes her less than that, but I suspect she’ll want to be very thorough, since this is the first ever health check he’s getting. I wonder if he was healed by elves before, or if he’s miraculously managed to never be hurt. That seems unlikely, given how many millennia we’ve been alive and who he was living with. If he was healed by elves or naturally, Sophie will find the traces of it. Elves are excellent healers, but at the most base level, we dragons are different from them, and only a dragon can truly heal another dragon... and some things, only Sophie can heal.

“Hmm,” she says finally. “Well, you’re healthy enough. Heading toward malnourished, so we’ll make sure you get plenty of meals with the nutrients you need. I can see you have some old breaks that have healed up fine, though I can re-heal them if you like, ensure there’s no lingering weakness. A few fresh bruises and scratches on your hands and feet—were you trying to get through the bars?”

He grunts.

“Yeah, I would have too. I can heal those for you. My main concern is that you’re not shifting enough. Your link to your magic, to your ethereal self, is a lot weaker than it should be. You need to shift regularly to keep both your biped and natural sides in balance. When was the last time you shifted?”

The energy in the cell changes, and I straighten again, the hair on my forearms standing on end. I know what he’s going to say. Sophie does too—she can’t possibly have forgotten what happened with me.

“I-I... what? I don’t know what you mean.”

Rage bursts up inside me, taking me completely by surprise. I didn’t think I cared about him at all, but I can’t stand that they’ve done this to *another* dragon. Caolan was right... Éibhear died too easily. I wish Wil was here.

Sophie’s sob is clear, followed by Brandt’s “It’s not as severe as... But it’s still there. I’m so sorry.”

“What? What is it!” He’s enraged now, but I don’t feel the need to race in there. I recognize that rage. It’s fear.

“Do you know what a dragon is?” Brandt asks, obviously trying to work out the best way to approach this.

“You. Me. We’re dragons.”

“Yes. And... can you feel how my magic is the same as yours? And Sophie’s?”

There’s a pregnant pause, then he says, “Mostly. Not exactly. We’re all a bit different, but mine is... more different.” This time, it’s clear that he’s afraid of what they’re going to say next.

“Yours is bound,” Brandt says bluntly. “The difference is that a part of your magic, the part that’s most central to your being, has been caged. You’ve been left with a small amount of surface magic free, enough to keep you alive and let you function, but the part that would allow you to shift into your dragon body or *any* other form is restricted. Probably right after you first shifted into your biped form as a hatchling.”

“It’s an abomination,” Sophie snaps, her voice thick with tears.

“You seem to know a lot about it,” he sneers.

“You’re not the only one Éibhear did this to. His was worse.”

There’s a shocked gasp at the mention of Éibhear’s name, the first time it’s been said aloud.

“Tell me what you know about Steffen.” Brandt changes tacks.

“The traitor.”

“Mm, no. In fact, it’s not even a matter of perspective. When you keep someone locked up and mentally and physically torture them for centuries, it’s impossible for it to be a betrayal that they choose to go elsewhere.”

Another shocked silence. “W-What do you mean? Is that what he told you? He’s a liar.”

“That’s what I saw when we found him,” Brandt corrects.

“That’s what I healed,” Sophie adds. “He had a far longer history of injuries than you in a much shorter span of time.”

“So... what do you know about him?”

His hesitation weighs heavily on the air. “We were separated immediately after hatching,” he says at last, “to keep us safe. We’re a miracle—the only dragon twins to ever exist. Éibhear feared that we would become pawns, or worse, if the traitors—” He breaks off, realizing he’s talking to the supposed traitors.

“So he raised you separately to keep you safe,” Brandt confirms, skimming over the whole traitor thing. “When did you find out about him? Steffen?”

“That’s not his name,” my twin sneers. “Just because he rejected his true name doesn’t mean it’s not his.”

“That’s an interesting attitude,” Sophie says in her dangerous tone. She might feel bad for him, might want to help him, but she’s never going to tolerate shit like that. A smug little smile tugs at my lips, and I settle in to enjoy the next few minutes. “From what I know about Éibhear, it doesn’t surprise me that he’d teach you to think that way, but here, we respect everyone’s right to make their own decisions about their identities, whether that be their name or anything else. Steffen’s name is Steffen because he wants it to be.”

“That’s right,” Brandt confirms. “Although I’m sure it will be news to him that he ever had any other name. When we found him, he’d never been given one.”

“But... I don’t understand.” Uncertainty has replaced the sneer.

“When did you find out about him?” Brandt repeats his earlier question.

“I always knew. Since I can remember. My nanny and Éibhear always talked to me about my twin—about Ailbe.”

The name rolls over me, sucking the air from my lungs. *Ailbe*. Is that my name? Was it given to me by my mother? Somehow, I doubt it. It’s an elvish name, and from all accounts, my mother was proud of being a dragon. I don’t know if she even knew we existed, but it seems unlikely to me, and even more so if the name I was given is an elvish one. If I had to guess, I’d say Éibhear named me... and then withheld it from me as yet another form of torture.

“That’s an elvish name,” Sophie says quietly.

“Is it? I didn’t know there was anything else.”

“Are you ready to tell us your name?”

A long pause. “Ronan.”

Also an elvish name.

“And you always knew you had a twin, Ronan?”

“Of course. We were separated for our safety, but I always knew we would be reunited one day. Until he betrayed us all and caused the deaths of many, then ran away to reap the rewards of his sins.”

“Whoa, there’s a lot to unpack there,” Brandt mutters, then adds, “I’m not going to cast any blame, but I’d like you to think about everything you’ve learned today, everything your magic is telling you. And I’m going to leave you with a few facts. You say you always knew about Steffen, that you expected to be reunited. You speak of his so-called betrayal with bitterness. I assume that means you thought fondly of him at one time.”

“I loved him. He was my brother, and he betrayed me.” The vehemence in his voice sends a wave of distress through me. I don’t know him, never knew him, am not sure I want to

know him... but at some point in our lives, he knew about me, and... he loved me? When I was all alone, desperately wishing that someone, anyone, cared about me, *he did*. And I don't know how I feel about that.

"He never knew you existed," Brandt corrects. "Not until he walked into that office yesterday and saw you sitting at his desk, actively endangering the only people he's ever cared about... the only people he's ever known to care about him. Steffen grew up without knowing his own name. Nobody ever told it to him. Until the day we raided Éibhear's compound and freed him, he spent his life locked in a room smaller than this, physically and emotionally tortured and traumatized."

"You're lying!"

"Am I?" The words hang in the air, heavy as lead. "You should think on everything I've said. I'll be back tomorrow."

"Wait!" Ronan's voice is desperate. "You're just going to leave me here? You said my magic was caged. You said it was an abomination," he accuses. "Aren't you going to fix it?"

"I want to," Brandt says, and I can feel the weight of his sorrow. "But the moment I do, you'll shift, and this room was designed to prevent that. It would cause you untold agony."

"So take me somewhere else!"

"I want to," Brandt repeats. "I want to take you home. But I have to protect the thousands of others who rely on me, and until I'm sure you won't cause them harm, you stay here. No matter how much I hate it."

"So you don't really care about me after all."

I'm almost at the door before I'm fully aware of moving, my body instinctively reacting to this attack on Brandt's integrity. His voice stops me before I storm into the cell.

"I care about you more than you care about yourself," my wing leader says quietly, yet his words vibrate through the air. "But you're asking me to care about you more than anyone else alive. If you will swear to me now, truthfully, that you will do no harm, directly or indirectly, to those under my protection and our allies, I'll have you released right now. We'll walk out

of here together, and I'll take you home to Here Be Dragons and introduce you to our family.”

The promise rings with truth, and I wait. What will Ronan do?

Eventually, Brandt sighs. “We’ve given you a lot to think about. I’ll be back tomorrow. If you think of a particular food or a book or anything you want, tell the guards, and they’ll let me know.”

I step away from the doorway to give them room as they come out of the cell. Sophie exits first, her eyes damp still, and I reach out and catch her in the hug she asked for earlier. At first she startles, but then her arms close tight around me and she clings. It’s... odd. I’m not used to being hugged, or even touched, unless it’s by Wil. This is entirely different.

I don’t hate it.

“Thank you,” she whispers against my ear, still holding on tightly. “I really needed this.”

When she finally lets go, Brandt and the demon guard have also exited, and the guard is closing the cell door and punching in the lock code. Brandt’s face is drawn and pale, and I know he hates having to leave one of his dragons behind like this.

But his eyes shine with affection and pride as he looks at me, and he musters a smile. “Let’s go.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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Wil

“SO IT WAS A WASTE OF TIME,” Steffen grumbles from where he’s stretched out along the couch with his head in my lap. He’s just given me the full, unedited, unabridged, every word he could remember—and with Stef, that’s almost all of them—recap of the visit to his twin today. Ronan.

It burns deep inside that Éibhear didn’t even give them dragon names. He had to take even that much from them.

“Not a complete waste of time,” I correct, sifting my fingers through his close-cut hair and smiling as he closes his eyes and stretches like a cat. “He may not have given us any information about his plans, but Brandt was able to make a connection with him. He knows now that he was lied to. He knows that Éibhear tortured you while using the promise of you as a lure for him. He knows he has a future here. There’s a lot for him to consider, and it’s not easy to just change your entire life view. You know that.”

He sighs and opens his eyes to stare up at me. “I know. And I had you. He has nobody.” There’s a touch of guilt in his voice now, and I bend to kiss him.

“Hey. You don’t owe anyone anything. We’ll play our part in making sure he’s welcome and safe, but you don’t have to do more than that.” Stef’s been through enough in his life, and he’s certainly done enough for other people. He can be selfish and put himself first just this once, and anyone who says otherwise will have to deal with me.

“It’s only... I think he cared. About me. Not now, obviously, and not for a long time, but before... He knew about me, and he cared.” His hand comes up and fumbles to take hold of mine. “All I wanted back then was for *someone* to care. And he did.”

“And you do now,” I counter. “If you didn’t, we wouldn’t be talking about this. But there’s nothing you can do that you’re not already doing. The next steps are his. As soon as Brandt is satisfied that there’s no danger, you know he’ll bring Ronan to Here Be Dragons. You can decide then what you want to do. But Stef... no matter what you do or don’t do, from the moment he accepts us, he’ll be one of us. Brandt will look after him always. He’s going to be okay.” And so will Stef, no matter what it takes.

For a while he says nothing, playing with my fingers and staring into space, then he smiles at me and leans up for a kiss. “You’re the best thing in my life.”

He sits up and cuddles into my side, and I lean my head against his. “You’re the best thing in my life, too. I just wish you had more things in your life that made you happy.” I’d never say this out loud, but if something were to happen to me, I want to know that he won’t fall apart. I want him to have other things to sustain him and help him through his grief. I know Brandt and Kethe and the others would do their best, but I’m not sure that would be enough... especially since the incident with Fabian a few months back. I’d thought they were close enough that Stef wouldn’t have done that, not even instinctively... but I was wrong.

“There’s more that makes me happy than I thought there was,” he muses. “I hugged Sophie today.” I freeze, then make myself relax, but he feels it and chuckles. “That’s exactly how she reacted. It was... nice. Not easy. I don’t think I could be as huggy as Dustin is. But there are some people... sometimes.”

“That’s great,” I murmur. “You don’t have to do or be anything that makes you uncomfortable. Just know that people love you.”

We sit there for a second, leaning against each other and breathing, and then he sighs. “Did anyone ever love him?”

Dangerous territory. “Ronan?”

“Yes. He had a nanny, and he grew up cared for and... not tortured. But did anyone love him? Or was he just another pawn in Éibhear’s army?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “We won’t know, unless he decides to share his story with us. I’m sure... he’s over five thousand years old. I’m sure in all that time, someone must have loved him. You can’t know someone that long, interact with them all the time, and remain completely neutral to them.”

“So you think he has friends still? Or did we kill them all when we took down Éibhear?”

I think about the friends I lost because of Éibhear. Dozens of them, hundreds, even, and that was before we even got to Earth and faced him in battle. “I don’t know. And I don’t know which would be the better option.” Either his friends survived with him and we’re now asking him to betray them, or we killed them... and are now asking him to betray their memories. They might have been in the wrong, but it’s not that easy to let go of friendships, even when you know they were toxic.

“So... we’re back to waiting.”

“Yep.”



IT’S my turn to go with Brandt to visit Ronan the next day. That came as a surprise—I fully expected Stef would be going with him again, and so did Stef, but Brandt strolled into our office and announced it would be me.

So here I am.

Brandt turns to me as one of the guards goes to unlock the cell door. “I didn’t let Steffen come in yesterday because I was

concerned about how it would affect both of them,” he says softly. “But I want you in there today.”

“Sure.” I don’t argue. I want to face Ronan now that he knows I’m not an enemy. Well... now that he knows he’s been on the wrong side all this time.

The door opens, and we go in.

Ronan looks up from where he’s sitting on... well, I was going to call it a couch, but it’s really more of an upholstered bench. It’s also bolted to the wall, and I can see some pretty hefty spellwork on it that will ensure it stays bolted to the wall. The cell also has a table/banquette combo and a single bunk, all firmly attached to the floor and/or wall. Otherwise, it’s empty. There’s four feet of space running the length of the room between the exterior door and the floor-to-ceiling bars, and that’s where we’re standing. I can feel the hum of magic from the bars, both familiar and other—presumably a combination of dragon, elf, and sorcery. Maybe even human.

Regardless, I can’t see a way to escape. If I were on the other side of those bars, I’d be fucked. Just the thought that we’ve locked a dragon in such an impregnable cage makes me sad.

“You’re back,” Ronan says, drawing my attention back to him. His face is like a slap. I *know* he’s Steffen’s identical twin. I’ve seen him before, know exactly how alike they are. Would have been fooled by the similarity if Stef and I hadn’t been lovers for millennia. But still... seeing my boyfriend’s face like this is jarring. Thank fuck his voice is different. “And you brought Wil.”

Another slap, though it shouldn’t be. If he knew enough about Steffen and the DEA to get into our office, of course he knows who I am.

“Yes... I thought it might be nice for us to be introduced,” I reply, my voice on the cool side. “Last time we met, you never bothered to tell me your name.”

Brandt sighs, and I hide my wince. Okay, I’ll be nice.

“And yet you knew I wasn’t... *Steffen* anyway.” He’s studying me closely, his gaze analytical, and it’s dizzying how much he does and doesn’t remind me of Stef. Some elements of his expression are the same, but he’s... colder? Stef’s not a warm and sunshiny personality, but he *cares*. Even when his paranoia is driving people up the wall, you can see that it’s because he genuinely wants us all to be safe. Everything he does is with that end goal in mind.

I can’t read Ronan’s goal here, and that’s unnerving.

“I’ve worked with Steffen for a long time. We have a lot of security protocols in place.” I keep the answer vague, not wanting to give away anything he might not already know. “We brought you some chocolate,” I add, changing the subject. “The guards will bring some with your next meal.”

His mouth tightens, but he nods. “Thank you.” The words are stiff and forced.

“Did you sleep?” Brandt asks.

“Yes. Some. The bed is oddly comfortable, but something about being imprisoned doesn’t lend to blissful slumber.”

“I imagine that’s true,” Brandt agrees blandly. “What would you like to talk about today?”

Ronan falls silent, watching us both, his throat working as he swallows. “Yesterday you said... you said that he was tortured. Ailbe. Steffen.”

Brandt meets his gaze steadily. “Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.” It’s defiant in the way a young child would be. He knows it’s true but can’t bring himself to accept it.

Shrugging, Brandt says, “I don’t know how to convince you. I’ve told you. Sophie told you. Wil can tell you—he was there. He was the first dragon Steffen ever met. When Steffen comes, he can tell you. None of us can make you believe it, but it’s still true.”

“Why didn’t he come?” It bursts from him.

“Did you want to see him?” Brandt counters. “The other day, it seemed like you didn’t like him much.”

“He betrayed us!” He hesitates. “I thought he betrayed us. I still...” He shakes his head. “What happened? I don’t understand what happened.”

Brandt turns to me. “Why don’t you tell this story, Wil? You were there for all of it.”

I’m not sure what he’s trying to do, but I shrug. “DEA Intelligence had finally narrowed down the location of Éibhear’s compound to two possibilities, and a simultaneous strike was ordered. I knew as soon as we got there that we were at the right place—we were barely in position before their first alarm went up. They had some good security spells in place, but we were a top-level, highly trained team. We were through their defenses before they could properly engage them.” I pause and think back to that day. “They must have drilled extensively on retreat, though, because as soon as we were in, they dropped any attempt to defend and just ran. It was the least violent strike I’ve ever been involved in—casualties were at an absolute minimum, and most were sustained from tripping over while running away. We took nearly everyone into custody within the first forty minutes, but we knew almost immediately that Éibhear had escaped. Some of the prisoners swore he’d been there, but I don’t know if that was true.” Now, I hesitate. I’ve kept it generic until now, a story rather than a proper report, but the next part is about Steffen... and I’m not sure I want Ronan to know it.

Shouldn’t Stef have the right to tell this?

“Just the bare bones, Wil,” Brandt says quietly, understanding my concerns. I nod.

“One of the team who was searching for stragglers came racing back to get me. I was the only dragon on our team, and he said they’d found a dragon.” I shake my head and look Ronan dead in the eye. “I was so confused. There were no missing dragons. Our numbers are small enough that we would know. And by that same token, we knew that no dragon

had ever thrown in with Éibhear. Ever. How could there be a dragon?”

Ronan’s jaw tightens, and I feel petty satisfaction from hitting that nerve. I don’t know why I want him to hurt, but I do. After everything I said last night, about making sure he’s safe and cared for, it turns out what I really want is to make him bleed.

Metaphorically. I’m not yet at the point of wanting to stab him.

Brandt’s magic brushes along mine, gently chiding and sorrowful, and I make myself let go of my anger. He probably doesn’t deserve it. If he proves otherwise... well, I can verbally eviscerate him then.

“But I went, and... there was a dragon. I didn’t know him, and he didn’t know me. Didn’t recognize that we were the same species. He was in a cramped little room with the window painted over, and it stank. I don’t think it had ever been cleaned or aired out. He was covered in bruises and scrapes and cuts, his hair matted and filthy. He tried not to react to anything we said or did, just hunched on the floor and pretended not to exist.” I clench my teeth. Even after all this time, even knowing he’s now safe and healed and well and knows he’s loved, these memories make me burn. “I sent someone to get Brandt.”

Those are just the facts; the bare, brutal facts. I don’t talk about what came after—the months and years of PTSD and healing. The way Steffen had to learn everything about our world and our people from scratch. He could barely even speak, since he’d only ever picked up words from what was said to him, and his tormentors weren’t exactly worried about expanding his vocabulary. His magic had been bound so tightly and for so long that it actually hurt him when Brandt freed it. His torture might have ended when we rescued him, but it was a long time before things were good. And even now, trust and safety are concepts he struggles with.

Yet it was during that time I fell completely and irrevocably in love with him. They beat him down and broke

him, but the core of him survived, and that core is a deeply loving man who cares about others.

Ronan's face is pale and sweaty. "I—I... no."

I say nothing.

"H-How can... *Why?*" he bursts out. "Why would they do that to him?"

"We don't know," Brandt says. "At first, we didn't have any idea. Then, after we came to Earth and realized what Éibhear's plan was and that it required the cooperation of a dragon... we thought maybe they'd been breaking him down so they could build him back up, gain his cooperation later on. After all, we rescued him long before any plans were close to fruition. But we didn't know that they also had you. So... we still have no idea why they did that to him." Unsaid but heavy in the air is the suggestion that they just wanted someone to torture.

He shakes his head and thrusts his hands through his hair. They're visibly shaking. Beside me, Brandt tenses. It must be killing him that one of his dragons is suffering like this and he can't do anything.

"What do you mean, Éibhear's plan needed the cooperation of a dragon? What plan?"

It's my turn to tense. Is he fishing to find out what we know? Hoping that he can milk us for information and break out or be rescued, then use our knowledge—or lack thereof, because let's face it, we still don't know all the details—against us?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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Wil

I LOOK AT BRANDT, waiting to see what he wants to do. If Steffen were here, there's no chance he'd want me to say anything more, but Brandt can and does override him on stuff like this.

His expression has that distant, slightly surprised cast it gets when the life force has just revealed something unexpected to him. He cocks his head, studying Ronan. "Éibhear managed to locate a spell that would corporealize the life force," he says quietly, and I bite my tongue. "Once that was achieved, he'd be able to... kill it. We believe that once the life force was no longer able to appoint leaders, his plan was to seize leadership for himself."

Ronan blinks. "But... would anything remain? If the life force was destroyed. What would have remained to be led?"

"We were hoping you could tell us." I spread my hands and meet his gaze. "We assume he had reason to believe it could be done. When the plan was first identified, we thought we were safe. We thought no dragon would willingly take part in such a plan—especially at a time when the aftermath of Éibhear's previous plan had us fleeing to Earth for sanctuary. Then he kidnapped a dragonet."

He stares at the floor, sighs, then walks back to the bench and sits. "The baby. Most of us disliked that. He said it was necessary, that she'd be unharmed. That it was the only way to lure the leaders of treason out and minimize innocent casualties."

Brandt and I exchange a surprised look. All this time, we thought Éibhear's followers were on board with his plans for selfish reasons. But now it seems that he might not have been entirely honest with them.

I remind myself that Ronan is likely to be the exception rather than the rule. He was born within Éibhear's power and groomed for whatever purpose Éibhear planned. The others deliberately rejected their former lives and chose to follow Éibhear even after it was proven how damaging his actions were... and they continued to do so even as our world collapsed around us.

"I think I might not know as much as I thought I did," Ronan murmurs.

"What did you think you knew?" Brandt asks.

As he tells his story, it's clear to me that he was indoctrinated from a young age, and then surrounded by sycophants as an adult. There are huge holes, logic inconsistencies... things that would have been noticed and questioned by anyone who'd spent time in a real-world environment. He was told from a young age that Brandt and the king—and thus any and all government—had enslaved and perverted the life force. Which... huh? I guess if someone used the spell that corporealizes it, it might be possible to imprison the life force, but that wouldn't be sustainable long-term. We're talking about the force that imbues and sustains all of existence. Even in a mortal body, even with its power greatly reduced, you'd need to act fast against it. I can't see how you could persuade it to use its power against the very universe it created and nurtures.

And that's what Éibhear told Ronan—that the collapse of our home dimension was due to the abhorrent actions the life force was being forced into at the direction of Brandt and King Raðulfr.

"But he said I could fix it," he murmurs, staring sightlessly over my shoulder, a single tear tracking down his cheek. "He said I was prophesied... chosen. That one day my power would flow forth and end the slavery."

I remember the day Brandt unbound Steffen's magic. The way it burst loose so fast, so hard, that he screamed in agony. The way his shift ripped through him as his dragon soul was finally freed from its prison. The explosion of raw power... including his flame.

A spell cast over the sigil by an elf, in the presence of willing ambassadors of all species across the two known dimensions and sealed by dragon flame. It seems like Éibhear's plan all along was simply to uncage Ronan's magic at the right moment and let nature take its course. He would have flamed instinctively, and having been raised by Éibhear and indoctrinated to believe in the cause—or what he thought the cause to be—his consciousness would have been fully willing.

“But why did they kidnap the fledgling?” I ask. “They had you. They didn't need a baby dragon, and she wouldn't have been willing anyway.” I glance at Brandt. “Right?” I was elsewhere on the battlefield that day, but I did catch a glimpse of the child, and she definitely didn't look happy to be there.

“She was extremely unwilling,” he confirms. “And too young to flame anyway. That part always baffled me. I wondered if the plan was to offer her back in exchange for the flame of an adult dragon... but could something done because of blackmail be termed willing?” He shrugs. “It seems she was a decoy.”

“She was there to lure you out,” Ronan confirms. “The idea was that you would come to retrieve her, and our forces would slay you. When you kill a leader, even if the forces are well organized with a clear chain of command, there's a short period of disarray. That was when we were going to rescue the life force.” His lecturing tone makes me bite back a smile. In a lot of ways, Ronan is... innocent. Certainly sheltered.

He grimaces. “You must think I'm stupid. Why would people who enslaved the life force and used it to destroy our homeworld care about a single child? That never occurred to me before now.”

Definitely sheltered.

“Not stupid, just trusting,” Brandt corrects. “You had no reason not to trust. And certainly, that plan makes more sense: they wanted us out of the way before they attempted the spell. It would have worked in their favor to not have the risk of interruption. We were lucky with our intelligence gathering, and even then, things would have been riskier and more drawn-out if the life force hadn’t intervened at the right moment.”

“Is that what happened?” Ronan asks, sounding vulnerable. “I wasn’t there. They said it was too risky—it wasn’t the time of the prophecy yet.” His cheeks flush, probably with embarrassment over having believed that story for so long. “Éibhear sent a few soldiers to update me, and they said you’d taken the child back, but that the plan was still on track. They went back to the battle, and...” He shrugs.

For a moment, I think about what it must have been like for him, to be alone in a strange new world, not knowing anyone, every single companion involved in a fight while he had to sit and wait... and wait... until they never returned. It’s been five years since that day. Has he been alone since?

“The life force brought down their shield,” Brandt informs him evenly, factually. “Éibhear had already been tried and sentenced for his crimes, and he was executed then. Tish—you knew Tish?”

“The sorcerer,” he says, his lip curling a little. “He was... creepy. Once he heard about how Éibhear engineered our hatching, he kept trying to take my blood.”

“What?” Brandt and I ask together.

Ronan blinks at us. “What? Was he an ally of yours? Undercover?” He grimaces, clearly unimpressed by the thought.

“No, he was scum. He’s dead too. What did you mean, Éibhear engineered your hatching?” My heart beats faster in my chest.

“Well... he said there have never been twin dragons before?” He sounds uncertain.

Brandt nods. “Never,” he confirms. “It never even occurred to us until I laid eyes on you.”

He rubs the back of his neck. “He told me we were special. That he made us that way. I... He never explained exactly how, but he said there were a lot of spells involved, and that the raw energy caused by all the disruption to our world helped him feed them? I-I remember I said once that it was ironic that the traitors’ actions had helped him to create the prophesied one, and he laughed. I guess because you weren’t traitors and I wasn’t prophesied.” His gaze flicks between us. “What really happened? Why did our world collapse like that?”

Brandt studies him for a long moment. “I don’t want you to be alone and locked up when you learn that. Yesterday, I asked if you’d swear not to do harm to those under my protection and our allies. Will you?”

Ronan sucks in a deep breath, a tear trickling down each cheek. “He did it?” he whispers, proving that he may be sheltered, but he’s not stupid. “Éibhear?”

Neither Brandt nor I respond.

“Did... Did anything I do help him?” His voice cracks.

“No.” Brandt shakes his head. “What was done used elf magic and was well in train before you hatched.”

His shoulders sag. “That’s something, at least.”

“Please, Ronan.” Brandt holds out a hand, careful not to touch the bespelled bars. “Please let me take you home and get that cage off your magic.”

He shakes his head. “I can’t swear. I... I put some things in action... I can’t swear.”

Every nerve ending in my body tingles, on full alert, and my hand itches to grab my phone and call Steffen and the others. Things in action? What things?

“You *can’t* because of those things already done, or you *won’t*?” Brandt asks, shooting me a warning glance.

“I can’t. I want to, but those things would make it a lie.”

Brandt turns to me. “This is your area.”

I barely manage to keep my jaw from dropping. It’s not really my area—the security aspect, sure, and preparing for whatever he might have put in train, but not this decision. My mind races. “Would you tell us every detail of what’s been done and what’s been planned, including the names and locations of any accomplices, and swear that from this moment forward, you will do no harm as Brandt requested?”

“Yes,” he says instantly. “And I’ll stay here in this cell until you can verify what I tell you.”

I glance at Brandt, waiting for his nod that the life force confirms Ronan’s speaking the truth.

“Do it, then,” I instruct. “Swear, and then we’ll get started on those details.”

He swallows hard and nods. “I just want one thing.”

A chill races down my spine as I wait for him to finish.

“I want to talk to... Steffen. I want to talk to my brother.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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Steffen

I STARE AT WIL. “He told you everything?”

He nods, then grimaces. “I think so. Brandt and the life force were able to verify that he was telling the truth, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t leave things out. We still need to check it all.”

“And he’s working alone?” I really hope so. The thought that we somehow missed a whole team or encampment is discouraging.

“He *is* alone.” Wil’s words are heavy. “He’s been completely alone since the battle. Éibhear had already given his people a crash course on how to survive on Earth, but for the most part, Ronan acclimated without any support at all.”

That’s impressive. I push the thought aside. “How dangerous were his plans?” I ask instead.

“Not as bad as I feared,” Wil hedges. “He’s the one behind the whole tunnels uprising plot. Why are you smiling?”

I hadn’t realized I was, but yep, my lips are curved up. “I don’t know. It’s kind of ingenious that a single person was able to mastermind such an extensive plot, with no resources and no connections, leaving all of us stumped.” My brain whirs along, mapping out how he’d have been able to do it. “It’s also terrifying. How was he able to identify so many weaknesses? How did he even know where to find the human members of the community?”

“Apparently Tish had a lot of files and research. Ronan still had access to some of them after Percy killed Tish. He

says it was the direction of the research that led him to this plan, so it's likely Tish had already considered using humans to bring down CSG from the inside."

That sounds about right, that the sorcerer who dreamed of enslaving humans would have plotted to use humans to bring about their own enslavement.

"At least this answers all those questions we had," I concede. "And since we already knew about that plan and were working on shutting it down, we're kind of ahead." I'm not used to all this positive thinking, but not even my paranoia can think of a negative to this. It's never a good thing when you discover a hidden faction plotting against you, but when they're part of an existing plot you already knew about, the risk isn't so bad.

"Agreed. It's not great that this happened, but it all ties in, so..." Wil shrugs. "And our head bad guy is mostly just misguided. He was lied to for thousands of years and deliberately denied access to anyone who might have opened his eyes to reality. That makes it easier too." He hesitates.

"What?" I lean back in my desk chair and eye him. Something's been off with him since he got back, and I want it out in the open before we meet with the others to update them.

"He wants to talk to you."

A peculiar shock goes through my body. I don't know why it's such a surprise—it makes sense. Especially now that I know we were both lied to... him more than me, in a way. They told him I betrayed them all. Me, they told nothing. He hated me for something I never did, and now that he knows that...

"What did Brandt say?" I ask. I wish I had a needle and silk right now.

"That it would be up to you." Wil glances at the door. It's closed but not locked. I know he wants to come to me, offer comfort, but he won't because of the risk of someone walking in.

No. That's not strictly true. He won't because I won't let him. I've been so afraid of someone hurting him to hurt me that I've been hurting both of us for a long time. I want a hug right now. He wants to give me one. And we're both denied that comfort.

"Maybe tomorrow." I pretend not to have noticed the look, not to notice the way his magic twines with mine in an attempt to provide the same support and reassurance as a physical touch. "I need to concentrate on my job right now."

"Of course. And you don't have to talk to him if you don't want to." He stops and shakes his head. "I mean, you will eventually have to talk to him. He's going to be part of our community. But it can just be casual. You don't need to talk privately—you don't have to be his brother."

The word runs through me like an electric shock. "Thank you," I manage. The truth is, I don't know what I want anymore. Maybe talking to Ronan will change my feelings; maybe it won't. But I know whatever I decide, I'll still have Wil. He'll support me through anything, no questions asked.

Maybe it's time I returned the favor.



IT'S late by the time we get out of the meeting. On the positive side, we were able to match a lot of the information Ronan gave us to things we already knew or suspected and fill in so many gaps. It's a definite bonus to know for certain that there isn't a guerilla army hiding in the wings.

On the downside, Ronan did a great job feeding the microaggressions of unsatisfied small groups within the community, and those groups are now on the point of open attack. His plan was to let them rip things apart from the inside—none of these groups is strong enough to stand against CSG or the DEA, but many of them creating conflicts at the same time would stretch us a lot. Plus, open fighting in the streets is a good way for us to be outed to humanity as a whole. And in the meantime, Ronan would have been able to slip in and out

of many places, pretending to be me, gaining access to the information he needed to take out our leaders and fulfil his mission of “freeing” the life force.

It’s a masterful plan, and a lot of my colleagues were reluctantly impressed by it. A little less impressed when we broke down exactly what we’d need to do to relieve the pressure cooker he started. Brandt’s going to need to keep Ronan at Here Be Dragons for a while, I think, until everything blows over.

We leave the meeting with a dauntingly long action list but the satisfaction of having a clear plan.

“I’ll check in with Brandt and Percy,” Wil says, pulling out his phone. “Hopefully they’re ready to go. I’m starved.”

“No... let’s go to Brandt’s office,” I suggest. I spent more time texting than I should have during that meeting, but things are arranged the way I want them. Well, not exactly the way I want... I’d prefer to do this at Here Be Dragons, where the security is so much better. But there’s no way we can leave the city right now, and frankly, I don’t think Brandt would leave while Ronan is in that cell.

Which left me with two choices: waiting or doing this here.

“Okay,” Wil agrees, shooting me a little sidelong glance I recognize. It’s the one he gives me when he knows something is up with me but is prepared to wait until I’m ready to share. I honestly don’t know how I’m so lucky as to have him.

The door to Brandt’s office is open, and as we near, the sound of laughter and excited chatter spills out. Wil frowns. “Is that Dustin?”

Dustin used to be a common sight in the building, but since he moved in with Rob in a college town not too far away, we mostly see him at Here Be Dragons. It’s certainly unusual for him to be here on a weeknight instead of overseeing activities at the youth center he runs.

Wil pauses in the doorway to Brandt’s office, blocking me from entering, then glances over his shoulder at me. “What’s

going on?”

I gently push him inside, then close the door behind us and lock it. The room is crowded, but this is the most secure room in the building, even allowing for the fact Brandt won't use the biometric locks.

“Thank you all for coming,” I say as I turn to face the room. Brandt is behind his desk, with Percy perched on one knee. Dustin and Fabian are propped against the side of the desk, while their respective partners, Rob and Rhys, are over by the window. Sophie and Kethe are sitting on the sofa against the wall.

“You said it was important,” Fabian reminds me.

I nod. I need to start, but I'm not sure where.

“Is this about Ronan?” Kethe asks gently, and I'm so grateful she didn't call him my brother. “Are you okay?”

“It's been a shock,” I concede, and see surprise on their faces. I don't usually share my feelings. That's something else I need to get used to doing.

This is my family. I'd do anything for them. It's time to accept that they feel the same about me.

“I never expected to learn I had a sibling,” I continue. “And we both have, um, complicated pasts. I'm not sure what I want to do next.”

My paranoia looms large, reminding me of all the many things that could happen if I do this, both possible and highly unlikely. *Thank you, but I need this.*

I take a deep breath. “There's a lot we'll need to discuss about Ronan, but I'll leave that up to Brandt. It's not why I asked you to come today.”

“Are we in trouble?” Dustin asks. “We didn't mean it, whatever we did.”

“Did we forget one of the security protocols again?” Fabian adds, frowning. “I try to remember them all, but sometimes I need my brain for other things.”

“No, it’s not—”

Dustin gasps. “Is this because Rob and I had sex in the sunroom? I erased the video, I swear!”

“Oh my god,” Rob mutters, turning red.

“You *erased* the security tape?” I demand, distracted. “How did you even get access to it?”

Dustin bites his lip and tries to look innocent. I inhale deeply through my nose and promise my paranoia we’ll do a full and lengthy investigation into the whole thing later.

“That’s not why I called. If you could just let me speak... This is hard for me.” Just saying that much feels like stripping my soul bare.

Attentive expressions focus on me.

“I...” The words catch in my throat. “I...”

Wil steps up beside me and leans in to murmur, “What’s up, Stef?”

I blink and turn my head to look at him. He gazes back, eyes concerned and curious.

He doesn’t know.

He... doesn’t suspect.

It hasn’t even occurred to him what this is about. Because all these years, I’ve forced him to hide. And now he can’t imagine me being willing to change that.

I turn back to face the others, my heart beating fast. “Wil and I are together. We’ve been together for a long time. He’s the love of my life.”

There’s a brief moment of shock, then excited babble bursts forth. A wave of heat rises from my feet, sweeping up my body, and black spots appear in front of my eyes.

Keep it together. Deep breaths. I’m okay.

Fabian’s voice rises above the others. “Wait, that was a secret?”

Blackness overtakes me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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Wil

I SEE Stef wobble and manage to get my arms around him before he topples. I use a combination of muscle and magic to hold him up.

Sophie points to the now-empty sofa. “Lay him down,” she orders, reaching for his hand. “Kethe, could you get him some water? He’ll wake up in a second.”

Kethe reaches into the capacious tote bag she never leaves home without and pulls out an insulated water bottle. “Does he need a snack too? I have crackers and chocolate.”

“I’d like some chocolate,” Fabian says hopefully, but Kethe ignores him.

“Is he okay?” I ask Sophie quietly. I really want to hold him right now. I wrap my magic tight around him instead. I can’t believe he did this.

Tears burn the back of my eyes, but I blink them away.

“He’s going to be fine. It’s a minor panic attack. I don’t think his paranoia liked the idea of sharing such a big secret.”

“But how was it a secret?” Fabian whines. “I knew. Didn’t we all know?”

A hush falls over the room, and all of us—except Steffen, who’s only just starting to come around—turn to look at Fabian.

“What?”

“How did you know?” I ask, trying not to sound like I want to rip out his spine. I love Fabian. I really do. He’s one of my dearest friends. But if he knew all this time and there could have been even *one* person we didn’t have to keep this secret around...

He shrugs, looking confused. “I just did? It’s not like it was a big secret, right? You were *obviously* having sex.”

The silence speaks volumes, and he frowns.

“You mean... it *was* a secret?”

“I didn’t know,” Dustin said.

“Neither did I.” Sophie puts Steffen’s hand down as his eyelids flutter open. “There he is.”

Kethe hands over the water bottle. “I had no idea. Though, it’s wonderful news.” She smiles at me. “You complement each other beautifully.”

I smile back, but before I can reply, Steffen gropes for my hand and holds it tightly. I look down into his worried face. “Hey. Who knew you were so dramatic?”

“That wasn’t how I planned it,” he rasps, and I help him sit up so he can sip some water, but when I try to let go of his hand, he squeezes tight. “No. I can hold your hand now. They know.” He stops. “Wait. Did Fabian say he already knew?”

“Apparently.” I lift our hands to my mouth and kiss his fingers—pushing his boundaries, maybe, but it’s so worth it. He tenses for a second, but then smiles.

It’s going to be okay.

Stef narrows his eyes at Fabian. “How did you know?”

Fabian throws up his hands. “I don’t know! I just did. You have the *vibe*.”

The... *vibe*.

“What *vibe*?” Sophie asks.

“The sex *vibe*.”

“The what?” Kethe plants a hand on her hip. “There’s a sex vibe?”

“Well... yeah. You know, when you’re around people and you just *know* they’re fucking like bunnies? Even if they don’t look at each other ever and are married to other people?”

We stare at him in horrified fascination. He blinks back.

“You don’t know?”

Heads shake.

“Oh. Well, everyone knows Stef’s a private person, right? And you never did couple-y things together. So I figured it was a convenience bang, not serious.”

“Is that why you were so quick to suggest setting Stef up with someone?” I ask, aiming for casual even though the memory of that conversation still burns.

Fabian’s eyes widen.

“Ooooh,” Dustin breathes. “I forgot about that.” He jabs Fabian in the ribs. “You knew they were sleeping together and you offered to find Stef someone else? Shame on you! Wil’s our friend.”

“I thought it was casual,” Fabian protests. “They never acted relationship-y.”

“Could you stop adding Y to the end of words to make adjectives, please?” Rob, the English professor, asks plaintively. “It makes my brain itch.”

Sophie eyes him. “I’ve never heard of human brain itch,” she muses. “What illnesses is that usually associated with? Does diagnosis require brain surgery?”

I want to laugh, because these are our closest friends and this moment is surreal, but I’m conscious of Steffen sitting quietly beside me. I glance at him, then follow his gaze to Brandt and Percy.

Ah.

A tiny bit of worry churns in my gut, but I push it aside. Brandt loves us all. He might be surprised by this, but he’ll be

happy for us too.

He notices our attention on him, and his face breaks into a smile.

I relax.

“This is wonderful news,” he announces, and Stef relaxes too. “I’m only sorry you didn’t feel able to share it with us sooner.”

“That was my paranoia,” Stef says quietly. “It... I...” He looks down at his lap.

“You don’t need to say anything else,” Kethe assures him. “We’re still happy for you. Do you want us to keep this secret still? We can do that.”

There’s a jumble of agreements. “Nobody needs to know,” Sophie promises.

“I kept it secret even when I thought everyone knew,” Fabian boasts, and Dustin shakes his head.

“That’s not the flex you think it is.”

“Éibhear raised me,” Steffen blurts. “Not that you can call it that. He raised Ronan too, but... differently.”

I put my other hand over his, sandwiching it in my grip, and lean my shoulder into his. It’s the first time I’ve been able to support him this way in a semipublic space, and from the way he clings, I can tell it’s welcome.

He takes a deep breath and lays bare his past. Most of the people in this room know he’d been in Éibhear’s custody and was rescued. They know he was mistreated during that time, and that it’s the likely cause of his paranoia. But that’s all. Brandt made it very clear when he brought Steffen home that everyone was to respect his privacy. Now, as Stef explains the way he was taught to never trust, to never show his feelings for fear they’d be used against him, I see horror, sympathy, and admiration on the faces of our friends. They know now how hard he’s fought and how far he’s come.

“What changed your mind? About telling us?” Percy asks.

“Wil deserves it.”

My head snaps around. “What? No, if you don’t—”

“I deserve it too,” he interrupts. “That day when you sent out the security alert, I wanted to hug you. When I walked into that room, I wanted to go to you, and I couldn’t because we were a secret. I couldn’t get near you all day. And if something happened to you, or to me, the other wouldn’t have the support they deserve because of this stupid secret. I still don’t think I’m ready for the whole world to know, but at least now we don’t need to hide from our friends.”

The smile that curves my lips is a little shaky, a little wry, but completely involuntary, and I lean over to kiss him. “Our first public kiss,” I whisper, and his mouth quirks against mine.

A cheer breaks the moment, and we pull apart to see Dustin clapping. “Can I plan your secret wedding? Please?”

“We’re not getting secret married,” I tell him, and his face falls.

“Really? But I had the most epic invitation idea. I was going to use invisible ink and a code!”

Steffen sighs, but when I glance over, he’s grinning. I love seeing him relaxed and happy—especially since the last half hour has been so stressful for him.

“So what happens now?” Brandt asks.

Dustin frowns at his grandfather. “What do you mean? We keep the secret and life goes on.”

“You forgot about Ronan,” Fabian reminds him.

“How could I forget that Steffen has a secret twin who we thought was evil but was really just brainwashed?”

“It’s the twin thing for me,” Sophie muses. “What did Éibhear do to get twins?”

“Sophie.” Brandt, Percy, and Kethe speak in unison, and Sophie flushes as she realizes one of the twins is sitting right

here and probably doesn't want to think about the genetic experiments that were performed on his energy matter.

"It's okay," Stef assures her. "I'm curious too. Though not enough to look into it. As far as what happens next... I'm going to talk to Ronan. I-I don't know how that's going to go. I don't even know how I want it to go. But we need to talk, at least." He hesitates. "I'd rather he not know about me and Wil. Yet, at least."

"Of course," Kethe assures him. "This is your secret to tell. We'll support you no matter what."

An odd kind of shudder runs through him, and I squeeze his hand. "You can't escape family."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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Steffen

I STARE STRAIGHT AHEAD as the guard enters the code into the keypad and wonder if I really want to do this. My paranoia says no. It wants to run and hide and never face anything related to my past.

Oddly, that's what tells me I have to go through with it. My paranoia is PTSD. It's my brain's response to the trauma I underwent as a fledgling and through a lot of my early adulthood. When I was a prisoner, I needed my brain to do these things. I needed it to be wary, to think about all the potential bad outcomes, to show me what my best chance was to minimize damage. It didn't always work, because Éibhear and his people weren't being logical. They wanted to hurt me, and they didn't need a reason. But it did work sometimes, and that's what counted.

Unfortunately, training my brain to work that way from such a young age makes reversing that instinct difficult. Logically, I know I'm safe now. I know Éibhear is dead and can never hurt me again. I know the people around me care about me and wouldn't hurt me like that. But knowing it intellectually and feeling it instinctively are very different things, and it's unlikely my brain will ever fully recover. It's always going to try to protect me, even when I don't need protecting. It's been two days since I told my chosen family that Wil and I are together, and even now, even after their overwhelming outpouring of love and support, even after seeing how happy it made Wil, my paranoia wonders if it was a mistake. It's up to me now, to the logical part of me who has a family and a boyfriend and a life to live, to decide whether

my actions are warranted. Whether it's safe to do something or if my paranoia has a point.

And this, right now, meeting my brother... that's safe. It's scary, and it's probably going to drag up a whole lot of bad memories, but Ronan won't hurt me. For starters, he's still imprisoned, at least until Brandt gets done with the paperwork. But also, he swore not to harm any of Brandt's people, and the life force attested to the truth of his words. He won't hurt me.

Not physically, anyway.

The lock releases, and the door opens.

Here I go.

Ronan looks up as I enter, then leaps to his feet. "Ailbe—I mean, Steffen. I'm sorry. I did break that habit, but with everything that's happened lately..." He trails off, his eyes fixed on my face the way mine are glued to his.

I saw him the other day and thought I was prepared for this, but how can anyone be prepared to encounter the twin they didn't know existed? It's going to be a shock every time I see him for a while, I think. But it does help to focus on the tiny differences between us.

After a too-long, too-awkward silence, his gaze flicks over my shoulder. "Is Brandt coming?" There's a note of anxiety in his voice that I remember too well, even more than four thousand years later. Those first few weeks—months, even—it was hard to be away from Brandt. He was the only thing that felt constant and stable. So I force myself to speak.

"Yes. He's making the arrangements to get you out of here."

Ronan returns his attention to me. "Really?"

"We verified what you told us, and you swore to take no further action against us. Brandt wants to take you home."

He swallows hard. "I don't even know what home means anymore. None of us can ever go home again."

Okay. This is it. Something we share that we can maybe bond over. We both lost our homeland.

Of course, he was unknowingly supporting the person who caused its destruction, but it might be best to gloss over that. Even if my paranoia *is* convinced he's a snake in the grass, lying in wait to strike again.

"It's always going to hurt," I say instead. "But you can find a new home. We have. Sometimes it's the people around you that make a home." Internally, I cringe. Probably not nice to remind him that everyone he held dear was killed... by us.

He looks away. "I don't think anybody's ever going to want to be home for me."

Something clicks inside me. This, I understand. This is something I've felt before. Right up until Brandt and Wil rescued me, I was sure I'd be alone forever. Tormented forever.

"Forever is a long time," I tell him. "Get through today first and see what tomorrow brings. When Brandt found me, I had no hope of anything." I watch him carefully as I speak. Brandt and Sophie and Wil told him something of what my life was like, but that doesn't mean he fully accepts it. "As a rule, we dragons are very accepting and... forgiving. It's hard not to be when you live as long as we do and exist in more than one medium." He looks blank. I guess nobody's told him what a dragon really is. "The first dragons had no corporeal body. We're beings of electric impulses. Although we've been corporeal for long enough now that it's our primary form, we're still different from any other species we know of. We don't think like any of them."

He shakes his head. "I must be broken, then. I-I don't think I'm that different from the elves."

"You are. But the part of you that's intrinsically dragon is locked away." His doubting expression doesn't change. "Trust me on this. Once Brandt unlocks your magic, you'll feel the difference. We were hatched in dragon form, you know."

"I know. I wish I remembered it." He shakes his head. "I was told that once dragons shifted into biped form, they stayed that way forever. But that the..." He stops. "Did Brandt tell

you what we've talked about? That Éibhear told me I was prophesied?"

I nod, and he pulls a face, looking away.

"Not my finest moment, believing that. He told me that according to the prophecy, at the right moment I would shift into a dragon, the only one able to do so since before recorded history."

That sounds like Brandt's guess was right—Éibhear had planned to uncage Ronan's magic and let him shift spontaneously. While telling him it was "ordained by prophecy." I didn't think I could possibly hate Éibhear more than I already did, but I was wrong.

"It's not true," I say bluntly. "We're special, but not because of a prophecy." I hesitate. "Did he ever tell you what he did to get twins? Or... or anything about our mother?"

"Not anything specific. He used to boast about achieving something nobody else had, and talk about how many spells it had taken, and how it would never have been possible if not for the energy imbalances from our world collapsing." He pauses. "What caused that, by the way? I know now it was Éibhear, not Brandt and the king, but I don't know what he did."

I'm almost certain Brandt would prefer to be the one to tell Ronan this, preferably not when he's imprisoned. But he and I are trying to build trust, right? Trying to connect. So far, this conversation could be happening between strangers, not brothers. Although, we *are* strangers.

"It *was* Éibhear." I say it before I can second-guess the decision. "When the king closed the border between home and Earth... did you know about that?"

"Yes. Éibhear said it was to keep us from escaping the king's evil plans."

I shake my head. "No, it was because Earth was in the middle of a huge war. Humans were trying to wipe out all the other species, and it was considered unsafe for our people to

be opening gateways in the middle of that and reminding humans that we existed.”

His jaw drops, and he blinks at me. “Oh.”

“Éibhear had been making a lot of money from interdimensional gateways, so he wasn’t happy about the travel ban. He started opening temporal gateways instead, and people paid to go back in time and visit the past. When the king and Brandt realized the devastating anomalies that had started occurring were due to the fact that the fabric of existence wasn’t made to support time travel, they asked him to stop. He said he would but didn’t. The deterioration continued, until... until it was too late to reverse.” I swallow the lump in my throat. I was freed from Éibhear’s custody around the time that discovery was made, and I remember clearly the way it echoed through our society. For me, gaining my freedom and finally experiencing the world outside the compound, only to learn the time I had left there was limited... That was devastating.

I see that same devastation on Ronan’s face now. “He did it? It was his fault... And he knew? He knew what he was doing was destroying our home, and he didn’t care?”

“I don’t know if he cared.” I doubt it. The Éibhear I knew cared only about himself. “I assume he already had plans in place to come to Earth.” In fact, he definitely did. If he raised Ronan with the plan to use him to seal the spell to corporealize the life force, he planned this all from the beginning—from not long after the king closed the borders. He used the energy disturbance from the temporal anomalies to power his spells to alter our egg, and we were born over five thousand years ago. His plan to kill the life force wasn’t a response to events—it was what he wanted all along.

Which brings me back to my earlier question. “And our mother?”

Ronan shakes his head. “I know nothing about her. He said he’d found a collection of dragon scales, and when he spelled them with the power of the temporal disturbance, they formed into an egg.”

I compare that to what I know of the dragon Brandt told me about. Dragons choose when to die. Shedding scales to procreate is a long and exhausting process. It takes a lot of time to collect enough—most dragons can only shed one a week or so. It's highly unlikely she would have gone through all that, then abandoned them or chosen to move on to the ether. Could she have been a victim of one of the temporal blips? Or did Éibhear kill her?

We'll never know, and sadness pangs in me.

“You probably know more about her than me,” he says with sudden hope. “I didn't even know the scales had come from a female dragon.”

“Brandt recognized her genetic signature when he found me. She'd already been gone for a long time by then. He has some stories about her, though, and some of the other dragons remember her.” I'm not quite ready to be the one to share those stories. They're not private, exactly, since other people told them to me, but the way I feel when I think about her is.

His lips twist. “Will any of the other dragons even want to talk to me? I lived with the enemy. I worked to bring down Brandt.”

My paranoia shrieks in agreement, but I push it aside. “You were lied to and manipulated from before you were born. And once you realized the truth, you acted to rectify what you've done. Like I said before, when you've lived for a time as a noncorporeal being, your perspective on a lot of things changes. You'll see, after you've done it.”

He sighs and sinks back into the chair he was sitting on when I arrived. “I didn't know. About you. Did Brandt tell you that? I mean, I *knew* about you, that you existed. But I didn't know what they did. To you. They told me we were separated to protect us.”

“Brandt told me.” There's an invisible band around my chest, restricting my breathing. I don't want to talk about this with him. What happened to me is something I've only trusted to a few people.

“I-I wish I’d known. Maybe I could have... done something.”

We both know that’s not true.

He rushes on, “At the very least, I wouldn’t have hated you after. When Brandt freed you, I wouldn’t have thought you were a traitor and cursed you.”

“It’s okay that you did,” I surprise myself by saying. “I had Brandt then. And the others.” Wil’s name is on the tip of my tongue, but I won’t say it. On that, I give in to my paranoia. What I feel for Wil stays secret from most of the world. “I didn’t need positive feelings from you then. Before that... I needed them then.”

“You had them,” he says fiercely. “I loved you. I longed for the day I would see my brother again. I made my nanny tell me stories about you...” He falters. “I guess they were all made up.”

Tears sting my eyes, and I blink them away. “It still counts. I don’t know what allowed me to keep going some of those days. Maybe it was because I had a brother who loved me.”

Flayed raw, exposed, with my paranoia screaming, I turn away and stare at the side wall. I’m done for now. I’ve shared all I can.

“Brandt will remove the cage from your magic.” I abruptly change the subject. “It’s not going to be fun. The actual removal won’t hurt, but after all this time being locked down, it’s going to burst out in a spectacular fashion. You’ll shift into dragon form very suddenly, and that’s going to be painful. Just the first time,” I add. “Next time will be fine. Normal. But you’ve never shifted of your own volition before, and it’s been a long time coming.” I try to remember what else I wished I’d known. I was the first dragon in recorded history to ever have been in that situation, so we didn’t know what to expect when Brandt freed me.

“How long will I be a dragon for?” Ronan asks in a small voice.

I shrug. “As long as you want. You’ll see—once you shift, you won’t want to go back to biped form for a while. At least, I didn’t. You’ll need to learn to fly too, and once you do, you won’t want to stop. You’ll get used to your magic, learn what you can do with it. Here Be Dragons is a safe place for you to do all that.” My paranoia whines at the idea of inviting a former enemy into my fortress of safety, but that’s not a battle it will win. Here Be Dragons is open to all dragons, always, unless Brandt says otherwise. It might be my responsibility to make it safe, but he’s in charge.

“Will you be there?”

I clear my throat. “Some of the time. I usually go wherever Brandt is, and I’m sure he’s going to want to stick close to you for a while. But there’s a lot going on here at the moment, so I might need to travel back and forth.” It’s a heavy-handed reminder that most of what we’re dealing with right now is his fault, and guilt stabs me.

He’s silent for a moment, then says, “I have... had a file about you. You’re in charge of security for all dragons, and since we’re identical, it was logical for me to use that.”

I say nothing. He’s right—if I’d been in his shoes, I would have done the same.

“When I was in the office building, people seemed surprised by me. At first I thought they could tell I wasn’t you, but...”

Oh, I see where this is going. “Did you smile at them?”

“Sometimes. Do you not smile?”

“Not as much as I could.” I try to remember the last time I smiled at a random colleague at the office. “If you smiled at them, they might have thought I was having some kind of medical emergency.”

“That explains it. Your security is really tight. I don’t think I would have gotten through if we weren’t identical. The wards and spells that checked for glamours were a surprise.”

I shrug and admit, “I’m a paranoid conspiracy theorist. I never planned for an identical twin, but I tried to cover

everything else. Was it you who hacked Wil's phone?"

He nods. "I saw him go into the bathroom, and I knew if I stood right outside the door, the range would be good. But it didn't work, and then I had to leave fast. I shouldn't have been there right then anyway. You were in the building."

That makes sense and is a real relief. Though I'm not sure why security didn't mention seeing me in that corridor when they reviewed the footage. If they'd said something, we would have known from then that I had a doppelgänger and could have acted accordingly.

"I knew you were paranoid," he confesses. "Éibhear kept tabs on you after you left. Were rescued. He said it must have been caused by the guilt of betraying us. A psychotic break. He said you were the only dragon ever to have experienced one, and it was obviously caused by your own actions."

"He was very good at twisting things to suit himself." For the first time ever, the thought of Éibhear doesn't bring overwhelming hatred and fear. Instead, I feel vicious, petty satisfaction that he's dead. All his machinations, all his lies and manipulations and acts of horror, and he's dead. He failed. He doesn't exist anymore and never will again. No reincarnation, no chance to experience things from a different perspective. No afterlife.

He has nothing.

It might not be the healthiest viewpoint to take, but I'd prefer to be petty and vindictive than drown in fear.

"I'm sorry he did that to you." Ronan stands and moves closer. "I'm sorry he's still impacting your life."

I smile involuntarily. "What he did to me then might have shaped the person I am now, but everything I have in my life is because of what he did. I'm not saying I'm grateful. I'm not even saying I wouldn't change it. But I'm not sorry about what my life is right now."

"I'm not either," a voice says behind me, and I half turn to see Brandt. He smiles at me, affection and pride warm in his

gaze, then looks beyond me to Ronan. “Are you ready to leave?”

My brother—because we might never be close, but that’s still what he is—takes a deep breath and nods. “I’m ready.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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Wil

“WIL, MY MAN.”

I look up from the guard schedule at Alistair lounging in the doorway. “Al, my man.”

Grinning, he comes over and flops into one of the visitor chairs. “I’ve been trying to talk to you for two days. Are you avoiding me?”

“Not more than usual.” It’s mostly true. When it comes to work-related stuff, I’m happy to talk to him. But a private one-on-one chat where he might ask about a certain lie I told? I’ve definitely been avoiding that.

“Pfffft. We both know that’s not true.”

“Why would I avoid you?” How am I going to get out of this? Should I send Enderl a message to come and interrupt us? But then he’ll wonder why, and his curiosity might be piqued.

“Because you know I’m going to ask you about the so-called security protocol that allows you to tell the difference between Steffen and the other one.”

I blink. “The other one? His name is Ronan.”

Alistair shrugs. “I’m not ready to use it yet.”

Normally I wouldn’t touch that with a ten-foot pole, but anything to divert him right now. “Oh? Why’s that?”

“A name is— Hey! Think you’re clever, do you, trying to distract me? I am hellhound, foolish dragon.”

I stare at him and slowly shake my head. “Alistair. My friend. No.”

Grimacing, he says, “It did sound kind of douchey, didn’t it? Okay, let’s pretend I never said it. But getting back to the topic at hand...”

Crap. I sigh. “Al, I can’t discuss any security protocols with you.”

“I’m not asking you to,” he retorts, and my heartbeat picks up. Which he can likely hear. Dammit. “Do you and Stef have something going on?”

Fuck. Why’d he have to guess so quickly? I look him dead in the eye. “Alistair, I can’t discuss any security protocols with you. Steffen set those boundaries for a reason.” It’s more than I ever thought I’d admit to anyone about our relationship, but I know I can trust Alistair. I need him to stop asking, though, or poking around the subject before others get suspicious.

For a long moment, he studies me, his face unusually serious. Then he nods. “If you can’t, you can’t. That’s how life goes.” He leans back in the chair he’s commandeered and puts his feet on my desk.

“Are you comfortable?” I ask, amused and very relieved.

“Don’t nag me,” he whines. “I haven’t had a decent night’s sleep in a week. And it’s been even longer since I’ve had sex—Aidan’s been spending most of his time with people whose humans suck. Do you have any idea how hard my life is without my snuggle bunny?”

Actually, I do, since Stef and I have been separated by work stuff a lot in the past. But instead of feeling the usual resentment and resignation that I can’t commiserate, I hug the knowledge to myself in gleeful satisfaction. Now that some people know, it’s not so hard. It’s a delicious secret now rather than a burden. And it’s proof of how much Stef loves me.

“How are they coping? The people whose humans suck,” I add. He’s talking about the shifters who had human relatives who were involved in the whole tunnel uprising kill-the-people-we’re-supposed-to-love plan.

He shrugs, tipping his head back. “About how you’d think. Some better than others. Mostly, they’re gutted. It can’t be fun knowing your spouse or stepparent planned to murder you and everyone like you. They get a lot of comfort from Aidan being near, so I guess I can survive without him.” He straightens suddenly. “I should send them gift baskets.”

“What?” I put down the pen I’ve been fiddling with.

“What could be better, when you’re feeling unloved and alone, than to receive a surprise gift that lets you know people care about you?”

He... might be onto something? “We could send them to everyone who was affected,” I say slowly. “Make it a general thing, instead of just for shifters.”

His feet land back on the floor, and he claps his hands. “This is an epic idea! I bet CSG and the DEA will sponsor it, and we could probably get a heap of donated goods too.”

“What would we put in it?” I unlock my computer and create a new file. “Things that make people feel good. Chocolate?”

“Definitely,” he agrees. “If we can organize them to be packed and delivered on the same day, maybe cake too. Something gooey and delicious.”

“Chips, for people who prefer savory food. Maybe we can see if we can get gift or discount cards for local restaurants? It’s good to have a reason to leave the house when you’re depressed.” And if ever there’s a time to be depressed, it’s when you learn a loved one wanted you dead.

“Slime,” Alistair suggests. “There’s something very therapeutic about squishing it between your fingers.”

I stop typing. “Really? I’ve never tried it.”

He nods emphatically. “It’s ah-maaaaazing. I’ve got some in my desk; you’ve gotta try it. Just don’t let Gideon see. Ever since that one time I accidentally put it on his chair and he sat on it, he’s been a whiny little bitch.” He starts to get up, but I wave him down.

“Later. If you go back to your desk now, someone’s going to need you for something. We need to get this planned out so we can take it to the others.”

“Yes.” He points at me. “Good thinking. Okay, we’ve got comfort food and therapeutic slime. What else?”

“A blanket? People like blankets when they’re sad.”

His eyes go wide. “With a message on it! Like, the blanket can say ‘You’re Great!’ Or be covered in smiley faces.”

“Excellent.” I add that to the list. “Nobody can be sad for long when they have a blanket covered in smiley faces.”

Alistair purses his lips. “This has to be a PG-rated gift basket, right?”

I stop to think about it. “Some of the people involved are kids. And we’re going to ask the government to sponsor it. So... yeah.”

He sighs. “Too bad. I have a contact that can get us a lot of neon dildos for cheap, and most people feel better after an orgasm.”

That’s true, but I still shake my head. “If we try to include dildos, we’re not going to get funding.”

“What are you talking about?” The slightly exasperated voice comes from the doorway, and we look up at Percy and David.

“Gift baskets for the people whose loved ones are asshats,” Alistair tells them cheerfully.

“No dildos” is Percy’s immediate response. “Otherwise, that’s a very nice idea.”

“Don’t speak too soon,” David warns. “Alistair, no glitter either.”

Alistair pouts, and I can see his point. “Why not?” I ask. “Glitter is happy. We want to make these people happy.”

Percy sighs and shakes his head. “You’re such a sensible dragon, Wil, that sometimes I forget you *are* still a dragon, with the same offbeat thought process.”

David chuckles. “Remember the tea trials?”

“Tea!” Alistair and I yell together, and I add that to the list. There’s nothing quite like a hot cup of properly brewed tea for comfort.

“Al, I’ve been looking for you,” David says.

“I didn’t do it,” Alistair replies, and I choke back a laugh.

Percy shakes his head. “Not yet, but I’ve asked Sam if we can borrow you for a week or so.”

I look up alertly. What’s this? Percy smiles at me.

“It’s fine. Brandt and I decided we want everyone at Here Be Dragons while we’re there. Ronan is going to need support, and so will Steffen, I imagine. We know your team is excellent, but none of them are as experienced as you or Stef, so Brandt asked me to borrow someone from Sam to oversee things.”

I don’t know how I feel about that. Sure, ultimately it’s Brandt’s decision to make, and Stef and I will still be available by phone and email—and it’s just a short flight to get back if something goes wrong. But I wish they’d run it past us before talking to the lucifer.

“Has Brandt told Steffen yet?” I resist the urge to check my phone. They’ve been at Enforcement Headquarters for about an hour. They weren’t planning to spend much time there, just what they needed to get the paperwork done. But I know Stef was going to use that time to talk to Ronan, and I hope it went well. I’d feel terrible about having to rip Ronan’s spine out after all he’s been through.

“I’m not sure. He said he was going to, but you know Brandt.”

I nod. It’s possible he doesn’t plan to mention it until it’s time to leave. That would give Steffen’s paranoia less time to catastrophize.

“I will gladly keep an eye on things while you’re all bonding,” Alistair says, and the words sound cavalier, but his tone is sincere. “Your team is probably going to be fine, but

I'll be here if they need me. How's Steffen coping with the whole not-evil twin thing?"

"Alistair," Percy and David chide at exactly the same time.

"What? I said *not* evil."

"Let's just avoid using the word 'evil,' hm?" Percy suggests. "Ronan's been through a lot, and he's feeling very vulnerable about his whole life being a lie. I'd hate for rumors to start that make things worse."

Alistair looks somewhat abashed, which is an expression I've rarely seen on him. "I apologize. You're right. It's just an odd situation."

Can't argue with that. "Stef's doing fine," I interrupt.

"His paranoia is okay?" Alistair's concern shines through the question, and it warms me. Stef and I should try to hang out more with non-dragons. There's no reason why our friendship group can't widen.

"Yeah. I think having so many whacked-out things happen so close together, then finding out they're all connected in a way that nobody would have ever believed possible, has gratified his paranoia enough that it's willing to let him stay in control."

Alistair snorts, and even David chuckles. "He's always been in control," Alistair says with a shrug. "The paranoia peeks through occasionally, but if it was in charge, his life wouldn't be so stable. I'm not worried about Steffen. He's a survivor."

Definitely going to encourage Stef to hang out with Alistair more. From the delighted expression on Percy's face, he's had the same idea.

"Before you all leave town," David says, "where are we with current events?"

"On track," I confirm. "Having this information from Ronan sped things up a lot. With all the master plots unraveled, it's mostly a job for Enforcement now. They're rounding up everyone involved and interviewing them to see if

they genuinely hate the community and our respective governments or are just idiots who got caught up in the slogans.”

“The idiots are probably more dangerous,” Alistair mutters.

“They’re certainly the loudest,” David agrees. “So we’re completely sure everything was linked? Are we safe to proceed with Operation: Survival?” He winces as he says it, but Alistair’s face lights up. He’s the only one who actually likes that name.

“Steffen and I spoke about that this morning, and he’s satisfied that the danger is back to where we thought it was originally—on a person-by-person basis. These big conspiracies actually helped us weed out the troublemakers a lot faster. We’re good to resume operations, and I think he has an idea for moving on to phase two and including nonviolent groups like Wiccans.”

The wide smile that stretches David’s mouth is relieved. “That’s great news. I’ll get phase one back on track while you’re away, and we can move on to phase two when you’re back.”

“Things are finally coming together,” Percy says in satisfaction.

My phone beeps, and I glance down at the screen. A text from Steffen, saying they’ve just left the compound. “They definitely are.”

EPILOGUE

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Steffen

Two and a Half Years Later

THERE'S nothing quite like waking up next to Wil in our bed at Here Be Dragons and knowing we're safe and don't have to hide anymore. I can snuggle here for another hour if I want, or maybe wake him with a blowjob—

The door bursts open. “Get up, get up! We have an egg!”

Dustin's already racing to the next room as the words sink in, and I sit up. Beside me, Wil blinks sleepily, jolted awake by the shouting. “Did he say we're having eggs?”

I kiss him, then throw back the covers and get up, excitement stirring in me. “No, we have *an* egg. I think—”

“Brandt and Percy!” Wil leaps out of bed and scrambles for underwear. I finish pulling on sweatpants and toss him a pair, then make for the door.

Dustin's on his way back toward us, the hall behind him littered with open doors and sleepy but excited dragons. “Good, you're up! Come on.”

I follow him to the sitting room that used to be Brandt's hoard room. My paranoia—then and now—thinks we picked the wrong room. It would prefer something more secure, with no windows, a solid steel door, and hardcore security, instead of an ordinary room with wide windows and a flimsy lock on the door. Brandt and Percy insisted, though, and the non-paranoid side of me gets it. Their egg needs a cozy, comfortable space to develop, not a vault.

The door is open, and I stop just inside, my heart clutching at the sight of the perfect egg in the nest Wil helped Brandt build. It's stone gray, and as Percy and Brandt hover over it, tears prick my eyes.

“Ohhhhh,” Fabian breathes as he comes up beside me. “So beautiful.”

Brandt looks up, his smile wide and uncontrolled. “Right? Did someone bring their phone? We need photos.”

Dustin whips his out and snaps a few shots as Wil comes to stand beside me, then frowns and lowers it. “Why does it look so hard? I thought eggshells were... breakable.”

Wil snorts. “Did you not pay attention when you were taught about this?”

A blank expression is the response. “We were taught about this?”

“The egg is hard because it's just transformed,” Percy says softly, tracing a gentle finger over it. “It will soften gradually, and by the time it's ready to hatch, it will be delicate and brittle.”

“Wow,” Rob breathes. I glance over my shoulder and see everyone else is crowding into the room. “That's extraordinary.”

“And the baby can hear us?” Rhys adds. His fingers twitch, as though he wants to take notes.

Brandt nods. “Yes. They can't understand the words, of course, but they can hear our voices. That's why there will be no arguing in this room. We want them to feel secure and loved.”

Everyone nods. “Of course.”

“Definitely.”

I take that in. I've never had any personal dealings with hatchlings or fledglings, not since I was one... and that certainly wasn't a sparkling experience. But this baby is going to be the most loved, protected hatchling ever.

“They need a playroom,” Dustin announces. “Somewhere they can just hang out and have fun... but be safe. Stef, you can handle that part. I’ll bring the fun.”

“Make sure some of their toys are educational,” Fabian adds. “Learning can be fun. Oooh, they need books!”

“I wonder what kind of birthday cakes they’ll want?” Kethe muses.

Wil leans against me. “I can’t wait until they’re here.”

The tiny niggle that’s been bothering me lately digs a little more. I take Wil’s hand and draw him out into the hall, away from the conversation about parties with ponies and clowns.

“What?” he asks me, gaze searching my face.

“Do you want that?” I tip my head toward the sitting room door.

“The chaos of our friends? Of— Oh.” His lips slacken as he realizes what I mean. “A dragonet?”

I shrug, but my heart is beating madly in my chest. I can’t believe I’m even bringing this up. Me, a parent? I would likely be so overprotective, my child would hate me. Or worse... they would be ashamed of me.

I don’t think I could handle that.

“One day, sure,” Wil says. “I think you’ll be an amazing father, and I want to share that with you. But neither of us is ready yet.” He studies me. “Or... are you?”

My head is shaking before I realize it. “No... not yet.” But I might be, one day, which is a terrifying and thrilling thought. “You really think I would be okay at it? I wouldn’t want to embarrass my fledgling.”

He wraps his arms around my waist and lays his head on my shoulder. “Every parent embarrasses their kid. It’s a rule, I think. But we don’t need to worry about this for a while. Let’s enjoy Brandt’s hatchling for a few hundred years and learn what we can from watching them parent.”

The anxiety twisting my stomach floats away, and my paranoia loosens its grip. I don't need to decide this now. We have time to think it over and gather more information.

"I like this plan," I tell him, and he smiles against my neck.

"Let's go back to bed. We're not going to get near that egg with everyone else here. I say we come back and meet them later."

"I was going to wake you up with a blowjob, before Dustin started screeching."

He grabs my hand and starts pulling me back toward our room. "I definitely want to do that."

"But you're awake now," I tease. Part of me still marvels that I can do that... openly tease Wil in the hallway of Here Be Dragons. So much has changed since I told our friends about us. Before, we had so few moments alone that teasing seemed wasteful. We needed that time for more important things. But now... now I can tease Wil where people might hear us, and it's okay.

"You should practice for next time," he counters. "Race you to the bed." He takes off, and a laugh bursts from me.

Then I chase after him.



"SO BEAUTIFUL," Ronan whispers, his gaze fixed reverently on the egg. Normally only family and close friends get to see an egg, but Brandt's the wing leader—and has been for a long time—so things are a little different. He has a special connection with every single dragon, and even though his position isn't hereditary, we all feel a connection to his baby as well. So he and Percy graciously invited all the local dragons to visit the egg.

My paranoia does *not* like that, which is why I've been in this sitting room all day, hovering. Thankfully, Ronan seems to be the last of the visitors.

The last few years have seen things change a lot for him. Once Brandt freed his magic and he was able to shift back into a dragon for the first time since he was a hatchling, he finally understood—truly, deeply understood—what we'd been telling him. He spent the next six months in dragon form, learning to fly, learning what it truly meant to be a dragon. Then he shifted to biped form and cried for three days.

Since then, he's been traveling around, meeting as many dragons as he can. At his request, Brandt arranged for him to be part of our outreach program, talking to dragons who are still struggling to adjust to life on Earth. It might have been nearly a decade, but when you've been alive for thousands of years, that's just the blink of an eye. Ronan considers this a part of his rehabilitation, no matter how often Brandt tells him he wasn't at fault for being indoctrinated.

Our relationship has improved too. Him being away so much made it easier for me to process my feelings. He asked if we could stay in touch, and our casual text messages allowed me to get to know him better without exacerbating my paranoia. Now when he visits, I'm glad to see him. We're friends.

"Yes," I agree. "So beautiful." I've been saying it to people all day, but it's still true. My paranoia might be mildly freaked about safeguarding an egg and soon a hatchling, but all of me is glad about it.

"How've you been?" he asks quietly, watching the egg. It hasn't moved, and won't for months yet, but everyone who comes in still watches closely.

"Good. New project at work." It's actually a new phase of Operation: Survival, but Ronan doesn't know about that.

It's going really well, by the way. The first two phases (family and friends, and Wiccans), had more initial hiccups than we expected, so we let them run for longer than planned before initiating this third phase. The Wiccans really struggled with the idea that they didn't need ritual and accoutrements to conduct magic, which held them back a lot. But there were a lot more of them using more magic than we'd accounted for,

which means we're a little ahead of where we'd expected to be. And, in all honesty, the way they've been using magic is beautiful. I've attended one or two of their ceremonies, just to keep an eye on things, and their reverence for this planet soothes the part of me that still aches for my own home.

Phase three is far more complicated: identifying individual humans who can be trusted not to abuse magic. This is a massive undertaking, and we've been working on it in the background for years. It's slow going, but I'm confident we can do it. And even though it's too early to see tangible results, Brandt and the other leaders tell us the life force has confirmed we're on the right track and making progress.

I was reluctant to get involved with this program at the beginning, but if this turns out to be my life's work—saving multiple species from extinction—I'll be able to move on to the ether fulfilled and satisfied.

Ronan and I talk for a little longer, and then Brandt comes in to sit with his egg. Ronan takes his leave, and I walk him downstairs and outside to our launch/land area. He's not staying this time—he wants to meet up with some friends in the city.

“Do you ever wonder if we were like that?” he asks wistfully, looking up in the direction of the egg's room.

“I don't think about it much,” I admit. “We must have been, but...”

“Éibhear never loved us the way this egg is loved,” he finishes, and I nod. “Maybe one day, we'll each be able to love eggs of our own.”

“You will,” I promise him. “When you're ready. I-I'd like to be an uncle.” The words take me by surprise, but I mean them. I plan to be a surrogate uncle to Brandt's hatchling, and I'd like to be an uncle to Ronan's too. When the time comes.

His eyes get misty, and he grabs me in a hug. My paranoia rears up, but I push it back down. I'm used to hugs now. I even like them... sometimes.

Ronan shifts into dragon form and leaves, and I turn and stroll slowly back toward the house. The late afternoon sun reflects off the windows of the sunroom, haloing the figure standing on the terrace, but I don't need to see his face to know who he is. My magic reaches for him, twining with his in a way that's more natural to me than breathing.

"Hey," he calls, and the part of me that always misses him when we're apart relaxes.

"Hey," I reply, reaching him. As we step into each other's arms, I'm home.



Thanks for reading *Conspiracy of Dragons*! To read the deleted flashback scene where Stef and Wil went from friends to more, subscribe to my newsletter: bit.ly/LouisaMBonus (You'll also be the first to receive the free prequel novella for the Demons-In-Law series, the next Hidden Species spinoff! Coming January 2023)

If you want to chat about my books, join the fun in my Facebook group, [RoMMance with Becca & Louisa](#).

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HI FROM LOUISA!

Hey folks! I hope you loved the Here Be Dragons series. This is my eighth book in the Hidden Species world, and I'm not ready to let go yet!

A thousand thanks to everyone who helped me through this book, which was so much harder to write than I expected.

Coming in 2023 is Demons-In-Law, a spinoff series featuring Gideon's cousins, and I'm so excited to get started on it! In the meantime, my Ghostly Guardians series is chock full of the same snark and humor you've gotten from the people at CSG and the DEA, so check it out at www.louisamasters.com or Amazon.

And don't forget to join the fun in my Facebook group [RoMMance with Becca & Louisa](#).

Hugs!

Louisa xx

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louisa Masters started reading romance much earlier than her mother thought she should. While other teenagers were sneaking out of the house, Louisa was sneaking romance novels in and working out how to read them without being discovered. As an adult, she feeds her addiction in every spare second. She spent years trying to build a “sensible” career, working in bookstores, recruitment, resource management, administration, and as a travel agent, before finally conceding defeat and devoting herself to the world of romance novels.

Louisa has a long list of places first discovered in books that she wants to visit, and every so often she overcomes her loathing of jet lag and takes a trip that charges her imagination. She lives in Melbourne, Australia, where she whines about the weather for most of the year while secretly admitting she’ll probably never move.

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